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**TWENTIETH
CENTURY HUMOUR**

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**THE FAST LADY
EVERYBODY PAYS
A CHILD IN THE THEATRE**

TWENTIETH CENTURY HUMOUR



LONDON .
ERNEST BENN LIMITED

Printed in Great Britain

“ THE FAST LADY ”

"THE FAST LADY"

A Tale of a Motoring Honeymoon

BY

KEBLE HOWARD



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FOREWORD

Nothing is more dangerous than a preface. I will keep mine as short as possible.

The scene of this tale is laid in England. You will search in vain for a camel, or even the faintest tinkle of temple bells. Poor old Somerset, Devon, Cornwall and Dorset will have to do.

There is no murder or suicide, and the seventh commandment remains unbroken throughout.

From cover to cover, there is not an epigram, a paradox, or a whiff of cocaine.

In short, it merely aims at being the sort of book you have in mind when you say to the gentleman in the bookshop, 'I have lost all my money, my best friend has deserted me, and I think I am in for a bout of influenza. Have you anything suitable?'

It will either kill or cure. Whichever happens, you will get your money's worth.

By the way, all the characters are purely imaginary.

K. H.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I TWO STARTLING SUGGESTIONS - -	9
II I MEET THE FLICK - - -	26
III A RIDE WITH TED - - -	40
IV A LESSON IN DRIVING - - -	53
V ALONE WITH THE FLICK - - -	70
VI MY FIRST PASSENGER - - -	81
VII O DAY OF DAYS ! - - -	99
VIII EGGS AND THE ATKINSONS - - -	113
IX A TERRIBLE ADVENTURE AT WATFORD -	127
X I WAKE THEM UP AT BATH - - -	140
XI MURIEL GETS OUT AND WALKS - -	155
XII WE ENCOUNTER A STRANGE PERSON -	170
XIII A RECORD IN MOTORING ANNALS - -	183
XIV DASTARDLY ATTACK ON THE "FAST LADY" - - - - -	198
XV A NEW USE FOR A BUTTERFLY NET -	212
XVI DEAR MURIEL'S VERY WORST DAY -	227
XVII HOW THE HONEYMOON ENDED - -	241

“THE FAST LADY”

CHAPTER I

TWO STARTLING SUGGESTIONS

JUNE 7.—This has been one of the most remarkable days of my life. I, Leonard Rabbidge, am going to put down exactly what happened because I feel it will become a sort of milestone, and when my children are old enough to understand what I am talking about—I am not married yet, but the day is practically fixed—it will be of the deepest interest to them to know what made me do what I eventually did do.

I had come straight back from my office, my invariable custom, and was making for my rooms in Eynella Road, East Dulwich, when I happened to meet, of all people in the world, my fiancée, one Muriel Levendale.

I introduce her in this formal way because one never knows whose eyes may fall upon these lines. In my mind, of course, or when talking aloud to myself, she is just “Little One”—a dear, unsophisticated child. We have long and learned conversations—when she is not present. Sometimes we argue—in the friendliest way—and I

invariably get the best of it. She is impressed, in these dream arguments, with my masculine power and superior knowledge. In fact, I do most of the talking, and she is content to slip in little endearing ejaculations, such as "Good gracious!" or "Well, really, Leonard!" or "Fancy that!" or "You astonish me!" And so forth. All a very pretty prelude to the grand orchestration of Life's March.

When we meet in the flesh, let me admit, I am not quite so talkative. I am powerful but reserved. I have seen myself in shop-windows looking very massive about the forehead whilst listening to Muriel. Complete strangers have stared, and turned slightly pale, as we passed by. They took one, no doubt, for a photographic celebrity.

Well, who knows?

This evening, this momentous evening, we opened in this way:

MURIEL: "Hullo, old thing!"

ME: "Oh! Good evening!"

MURIEL: "Going home?"

ME: "Well, I was—unless——"

MURIEL: "That's all right. I'll stroll along your way."

ME: "Do."

I knew, of course, that there was something in the wind. A girl like Muriel does not stroll anybody's way unless it is worth her while to make that body's way her way. Don't think that I am imputing mercenary motives. Muriel is far above all that. But she is a practical girl, and she would not traipse about hot streets with which she is perfectly familiar just to kill time.

MURIEL: "Leonard, I've been thinking."

TWO STARTLING SUGGESTIONS 11

ME: "Have you, my dear? I'm very glad. There are so many wonderful things to think about in this beautiful world."

MURIEL: "I've been thinking about us."

ME: "Charming! Charming!"

MURIEL: "D'you realise that we shall have been engaged eighteen months next Thursday?"

ME: "Really? How time flies!"

MURIEL: "Yes, that's just it. Time does fly, and it flies faster with girls than with men."

I said I was glad she was not bored. We were nearing Eynella Road.

MURIEL: "It isn't quite a question of that. I've been wondering whether you would like to be released from your engagement?"

I stopped still. Absolutely stock still, whoever might be looking.

ME: "My -- my dear Muriel!"

MURIEL: "Well! Men often repent of these things. If you do, now's your chance."

ME: "But whatever made you dream of such a thing! I—well—I——!"

MURIEL: "Walk on, Leonard. People are noticing. I've had plenty of time to dream, old thing."

ME: "Can one have too much of love's young dream?"

MURIEL: "Certainly. It's all very well for you. You've got your office to dream in, and the train, and the tram, and all that. I have to dream at home, and I'm fed up with home, sweet home."

ME: "My dear Muriel!"

MURIEL: "If you call me your dear Muriel again I shall yell for the fire-escape! If I were your dear

Muriel you'd pick me up in your arms, and rush me to a registry-office, and marry me right off ! But you don't ! You simply call me your dear Muriel, and hold my hand, and watch moon after moon, and that's as far as it ever gets ! And now I can't cry because all the people in this beastly street are watching from behind their windows ! "

I was amazed. Simply, without exaggeration, staggered. I think I did stagger. The world all went round. A tremendous experience !

The next thing I heard was Muriel talking. She said I must either give her up or call on Mr. Leven-dale this very evening and fix the date of the wedding. She said she could get all her clothes together in a month, and she knew just the little house ; and Weston-super-Mare would do as well as anywhere else for a honeymoon if I was so set on it.

I said I would bow to her in all things. I said I could probably arrange to get my holiday in a month's time by swopping with some other fellow. I said that as her father had most generously offered to buy us a house so long as we paid the mortgage it was not for me to raise any objection to any house she might fancy. I said that I was not really " set " on Weston (*super Mare*) for the honeymoon, but that an aunt of mine, the first of our family to be cremated, had had her ashes deposited there, and the place was naturally (for me) teeming with romance.

Shortly after that we parted, only to meet again later in the evening. The dear girl was too considerate to kiss me in the street where I lived, so we walked a little farther and said good-bye,

temporarily, just behind the gas-works. Then, trembling a little, I went running home to my tea.

I had had my tea, and I was making out a little list of suitable books for the honeymoon. It was quite delightful to sit at the open window, pencil in hand, and picture myself on the sands at Weston, reading aloud to my dear Muriel. She is the sweetest girl in the world, but her reading at present is rather on the flippant side, and that, of course, must be checked if we are to face the battle of life, as one must face it, with stern, set faces. So I jotted down the following :

- “ Nasmyth, James, Memoir of,” by Samuel Smiles. (A book I have often longed to peruse.)
- “ Living Lights : Phosphorescent Animals.”
- “ Home Life of the Ichthyosaurus.”

I had got as far as that, and was trying to think of something really solid, when a piece of earth came flying through the open window and fell right on my paper. I jumped up, rather crossly, and looked out. Who should I see but a half friend of mine who calls himself Lindsay Mountford. That isn't his real name, but he happens to be mixed up with the motoring business, and he says it inspires confidence if people think you are connected with an aristocratic family impoverished by the war and taxation.

“ Hallo, old cock ! ” he shouted coarsely.

“ 'Ssh ! ” I replied. I don't so much mind being called “ old cock ” in confidence, but one doesn't want it shouted all up and down the street where one resides. Besides, I am not the type that a name of that sort suits. I am the quiet, sensible,

studious type, very neat and punctual in my habits, and with just that extra touch of dignity conferred by horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Can I come in?" he asked, kicking open the front gate with a shabby shoe of fashionable shape. (I don't know whether you have noticed that peculiarity of young gentlemen in the motor trade. They all wear smartly-cut clothes, with permanently turned-up trousers and all that sort of thing, and yet they nearly all look what I might term car-soiled Natural, perhaps, but interesting. I am a great observer.)

"Not this evening," I answered.

"Thanks," he said, and walked straight into the house.

This was a distinct nuisance, as I wanted to be quite alone with my little list and my thoughts of dear Muriel. However, up the stairs he came, and I had only just time to pop away my paper when he banged open the door.

"Bit of luck catching you at home," he began.

"Quite," I said. This is a non-committal word of the greatest value. I employ it on many occasions.

"I'm going to put you on to something good," went on Lindsay.

"I never do it," said I.

"Never do what?"

"Bet on horses."

"This isn't a horse, you old goat!" (Here I closed the door.) "It's a car."

"A car? Do you mean a *motor*-car?"

"Of course. Think I meant a tram? I've just come across a regular snip—a peach—a beaut!

The moment I set eyes on her I thought of you ! 'The very thing for dear old Rabbit,' I said to myself."

I should like to remind you that my name is Rabbidge—Leonard Rabbidge. A good name in many respects, but easily lending itself to the easy and rather vulgar humour all too prevalent in modern London.

"Very kind of you," I retorted quietly, "but I am not contemplating the purchase of a car. Such money as I have contrived to save——"

"How much *have* you saved?" he cut in. The question was grossly impertinent, as I saw later, but it took me unawares.

"Three hundred pounds," I answered.

"My dear fellow," cried Lindsay, gripping me by the hand and shaking it very hard, "wealth! Positive wealth! D'you realise that there are many people in important positions in London to-day who could not raise three hundred in cash to save their lives? Ask any banker! Practically the whole of this country is living on overdrafts! Nobody has any money at all! And here are you with three hundred quids walking about as though you were nobody! It isn't fair to yourself, and I'm blown if it's fair to Muriel!"

"Miss Levendale," I replied haughtily, "agrees with me that for some years to come we must practise the strictest economy."

"Rot, old man!" was the calm contradiction. "You're an awfully good chap and all that, but I'll tell you what you want—*dash*! You're simply screaming out for more dash! With dash you could do anything—climb to any heights! No

dash, and you'll never get anywhere! Simply nowhere at all!"

"Well, you've got dash," I stung.

"Precisely."

"Have you climbed many heights?"

"My dear fellow, that sneer is hardly worthy of you."

He rose to go and my heart smote me. He looked so shabby and crestfallen all of a sudden.

"I apologise!" I cried, springing towards him with outstretched hand.

Lindsay hesitated. "You wish me to remain?"

"Please do!"

"And you'll listen to what I have to say about the car?"

"Oh, certainly, but——"

"Good!" He was his old self again in a moment, smiling, and looking all over the room for a cigarette, which I don't keep. So, with a still pathetic air, he pulled a packet out of his pocket, extracted a cigarette, and lit it with the utmost dexterity.

"It's a secondhand Flick," he announced.

"What is?"

"The car."

"Oh! I thought it was a Snip."

"So it is. You've heard of the Flick cars, haven't you?"

"Never," I whispered, thinking they might be a secret, like the tanks.

"Never heard of the Flicks?" His face expressed horrified incredulity.

"Never in my life. Don't tell me if you'd rather not."

"But I must tell you! It's only right that you

should know. The Flick car is the most wonderful thing in light cars on the market. The heads of the cylinders are detachable——”

“Great Heavens ! ” I cried, genuinely shocked.

“The engine is self-lubricating——”

“You don’t mean that ? ”

“Yes, I do. And there’s an interior worm drive.”

I shuddered, and tried to deviate the conversation.

“Why is it called a Flick, my dear Lindsay ? Surely the name is a little—what shall I say ?—flippant ? ”

“The name is simply an abbreviation. It stands for Flamingo Lighting and Ignition Company.”

“Excellent ! Capital ! Most ingenious ! ” Laughing, I rubbed my hands.

• “You’re warming up,” observed Lindsay.

“I ? Personally ? Yes. But my poverty remains. Yes, my poverty remains,” I repeated, rather pleased with the sound of it.

“You mean that your wealth remains. You say you have three hundred pounds. Very well. Owing to my connection with the trade, I can get you ”—here he closed the window, so that we were now entirely shut in, like the Guy Fawkes conspirators—“I can get you a Flick, as good as new, for *one hundred and fifty*.”

I was touched. It was really uncommonly good of him to take all this trouble. Besides, one felt that it might do him harm in his career. I pointed that out. I said :

“My dear Lindsay, nobody appreciates **your** kindness more than myself, but I really cannot allow you to make this sacrifice. After what you have told me about the Flicks, especially all those

private details in connection with their insides, I cannot allow you to jeopardise your good name in the motoring world by letting me have one at the price you name."

"All right," he replied gloomily. "One-twenty-five."

"What did you say?" I staggered.

"One-twenty-five to you. But it's rock bottom."

Another recommendation? Clearly, he had misunderstood me. He thought I was haggling. He attributed all my altruistic remarks to sarcasm! Is it not strange how often that happens in life? When you try to be most helpful, the bruised and smarting world suspects you of cynicism!

"This conversation must stop," I observed wearily. "I had better tell you, quite frankly, that my duty to my dear Muriel renders it utterly impossible that I should even dream of expending the sum you mention on a motor-car. A motor-car! Me! Think of my responsibilities! I have to pay the mortgage on a house, furnish it, light it, warm it, nourish it, rate it, tax it, and upkeep it! And there is the future to consider. Ere long, we may need a small car propelled by human agency."

"A push-bike?" he scorned.

"No, my dear fellow. A pram."

"Oh, good Lord! Why peer into the future like that? Now, wait a minute. Let me show you why it is your duty to yourself, as well as to Muriel——"

"Miss Levendale," I interjected softly.

"—to buy this Flick. It is your duty to yourself because it would make old man Levendale

cough up twice the stuff you would otherwise get out of him——”

“The poor man has been hard hit, you know.”

“Hard hit? Levendale? Tell that to the Stock Exchange. He’s screwing you down because he thinks you’re a man of small ideas. Let him see you’re a man of big ideas. Let him see you have dash! Let him see you dashing up his drive in your Flick car! That’s the way to make the old blighter pull out his cheque-book! As for Muriel, she’d think twice as much of you. Nothing appeals to women like dash and success.”

“I mustn’t deceive the poor girl. Really and truly, I am neither dashing nor successful.”

“And you never will be until you have more confidence in yourself. My dear chap, the day you pull up at the Levendales’ door in your own car, jam the brakes on, step out jauntily, and slam the door, that day will see you transformed into a new man.”

“And what if the car stuck in the drive? What if I ran over the geranium bed? What if the car mounted the front steps and dashed into Mr. Levendale? Any one of these events would probably see me transformed into a bachelor for life.”

“Nothing of the sort *will* happen. You will learn to drive under the tuition of an excellent young fellow I know—one Ted by name—who is employed at the garage where the car now rests. When you are absolutely certain of yourself you will appear at the Levendales’, and not before. Wait! I haven’t finished. I told you it was your duty to Miss Levendale as well as to yourself to

buy this car. Let me explain that also I am asking you one hundred and fifteen pounds for this car, cash down. She wants a little spot of paint and possibly a couple of nuts or so. When that is done, when she is running sweetly as only a Flick can run, if you feel that you want to dispose of her, what do you do ? "

" Quite. What do I do ? "

" You bring her to me, and you say, ' Lindsay, old boy, I'm thinking of getting rid of this car.' ' Oh,' I say, ' are you ? Want something a bit more powerful ? ' "

" I don't think I should say that," I struck in.

" Well, never mind your reason. ' You want me to dispose of her for you ? ' I should say. ' Yes,' you reply. ' Righto, old cock,' I say. ' What's your lowest price ? ' ' Two hundred,' you say."

" My dear fellow ! Ought we ? "

" Certainly. The car will have enhanced in value. She wants work. We all depreciate without work, don't we ? Very well. ' Two hundred,' you say. ' Good,' I say. ' Bring her round and I'll do my best for you.' You see, now, why it is your duty to Muriel to buy the car, eh ? "

" Well, of course, I never thought about making a profit."

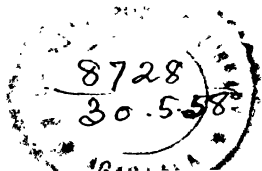
" I know. But I did. I always do. Not for myself," he added hastily, " but for a friend. Got a spot of anything ? Talking makes me dry."

" I could get you some tea in a minute."

" Doctor's cut me off tea."

" A cup of nice cocoa ? "

" No, thanks. Too bilious. Never mind. I'll hold



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out a bit longer. Let's rehearse the scene of when you drive up to the door."

"But I may never drive up to the door."

"I know. Still, what's the harm in feeling what it's like to drive up to a door? All experience in life is useful."

"But shan't I look rather an ass? I mean, we haven't got a car, or a drive, or Mr. Levendale, or anything."

"Where's your imagination, old cock? This fireplace is the door. I'm your future father-in-law standing on the front steps, smoking a cigar. You go outside, make a noise like a motor-car, and come sweeping in. Pull up, put on the brake, wave your hand airily, step out, and leave the rest to me."

"Very well," I agreed doubtfully.

Now, I am somewhat of an actor, though few people know it. I have the acting blood in my veins. I often do long scenes from the classical plays before the glass in my bedroom. So Lindsay's suggestion appealed to me more strongly than he thought.

I decided to astonish him. Going hurriedly into my bedroom, which adjoins the sitting-room, I put on my thickest overcoat, a muffler, a cloth cap, and a pair of gloves. My horn-rimmed glasses added considerably to the whole effect. I then propped open the sitting-room door, retired as far as the head of the stairs, and hooted like a motor-car. The next instant I dashed into the sitting-room, stopped dead, waved my hand airily, and waited for Lindsay. To my horror, he was studying a photograph of Muriel which stood on the mantelpiece,

and his shoulders were shaking as though with sobs.

" My dear chap," I cried, " what on earth's the matter ? " It was terrible to see anyone so moved. Besides, I did not quite like the thought of Lindsay being in love with Muriel. He's so dashing.

" Nothing," he muttered, in a strange voice. " Do it again, will you ? "

" Are you sure you're all right ? "

" Per—perfectly," he gasped.

So out I went and did it all again. At least, I got as far as the hooting, to which I added a little chug-chug on my own account, when the voice of Mrs. Gadden, my landlady, came from the ground floor.

" Whatever's the matter, Mr. Rabbidge ? " she called up.

" Nothing," I called back. But she had caught a glimpse of me from the passage.

" 'Ave you caught a cold this 'ot night ? "

" Not in the least, Mrs. Gadden. It's just a little game I'm having with my friend. How's your little boy ? "

" Oh, he's better, sir, thank you, though I'm still keeping him on liquids, as the doctor told me. Their little stummicks are so delicate at that age, and the doctor says——"

" Come on ! " yelled Lindsay.

" Quite," I replied. Then I tooted rather musically and re-entered the sitting-room. Lindsay was facing me this time, but his face was very red and he was wiping his eyes in a suspicious manner. My heart sank.

" Don't forget the brake ! " he shouted.

"Where is it?"

"You've got two—foot-brake and hand-brake."

"Quite. I used the foot-brake." Rather smart, that.

"That your car?" asked Lindsay, in a deep voice, not in the least like Mr. Levendale's.

"Yes," I answered, stepping out airily.

"Smart. Very smart. What make is it?"

"A Flamingo. The head comes off, you know."

"What's that?" cried Lindsay, in his ordinary voice.

"That's what you said," I reminded him.

"I'm sure I didn't. Oh, I know now what you mean. The cylinder-heads are detachable."

"Yes, and the lubricity is automatic. Care for a little run, sir?"

"Excellent!" cried Lindsay. "You're more than half a motorist already. Shall we go round and see the car now? I dare say the garage is open."

"I can't now, old man. I'm going to see Muriel at eight."

"Oh. Well, I wouldn't say anything about the car. In fact, I wouldn't say a word to anyone until you've actually bought her and learnt to drive."

"I won't. You think I *could* drive?"

"Certain of it. Don't you feel like it yourself?"

"Well, in a way, it has given me confidence, coming in like that. It may be the clothes."

"Not it! You're a born driver! I could tell that from the way you stopped the car and stepped out. Heaps of drivers never acquire that manner in ten years. And then you have just the hands for the wheel."

" Have I ? " I looked at my hands. They seemed very ordinary to me.

" Certainly. Flexible. Artistic. You want hands for driving a car just as you do with a horse. You ride a bike, don't you ? "

" Oh, yes, a push-bike."

" Same thing. That teaches you the use of the road. The road is familiar ground to you. Some people who get into a car have never before in their lives been off the pavement. What's the result ? They find themselves in the midst of traffic. They lose their heads. Don't know what to do. You are at home in the road, which is a great advantage."

All this was very reassuring and comforting. Clever fellow, Lindsay.

" To-morrow, then, at Milton and Poppett's Garage, Fancy Road, Peckham Rye. What time shall we say ? Six-thirty ? "

Six-thirty was agreed upon, and Lindsay promised to be there before me and have the car ready. He would take me for a run round the Crystal Palace, and, if we found a quiet road, with no policemen about, I might handle the car myself.

It was in a rather shaky condition, after all I had been through, that I presented myself this evening at the Levendales'. They live at Mount Pleasant, where the houses stand back from the road and are approached by a carriage sweep. I stood for some minutes in the sweep, calculating the length and width of it.

" What in the world are you doing ? " shouted Muriel suddenly, from the doorstep.

" Oh, nothing ! " I called back. " Merely admiring your drive."

“ You were saying something that sounded like ‘ chug-chug.’ I thought you were trying to imitate a nightingale.”

Dear girl ! Such a sense of humour ! Such a flow of badinage ! If I do buy the car, I shall let her think of a really good name for it.

We all spent the evening talking about the wedding, and the house, and Weston (*super Mare*). But now our honeymoon plans may be quite changed ! Thrilling, if you like !

CHAPTER II

I MEET THE FLICK

JUNE 8.—To-day has been an even more remarkable day than yesterday. In point of fact, yesterday was nothing to it. Let me set down exactly what occurred without any trace of exaggeration. In years to come, when motor-cars are as common as hoops, the British Museum will, I think, be glad of my little diary.

Punctual as ever, I arrived at Milton and Poppett's Garage, Fancy Road, Peckham, at 6.25. I did not want to keep Lindsay Mountford waiting. Besides, I was very excited. To say that I slept the previous night would be a misnomer. I did not. I chugged round the entire world at a furious pace, ever and anon pulling up smartly, stepping out gracefully, and waving my hand airily. It was a wonderful dream.

I expected to see the Flick outside the main entrance to the garage, with Lindsay in the driver's seat, all ready to start. But it was not there. In fact, there was nothing outside the garage except a few small children, amusing themselves by trying to injure each other for life.

Approaching the great doorway, I looked in. The garage was a huge place, with a glass roof, and a great many cars of all sorts standing about. They

all looked much bigger than I expected. Most of them had tops on, and those without tops were designed to hold four or five people at the least. None of these, I felt, could be my—or, rather, the—Flick. I felt despondent, somehow or other, at the idea that it might have been snapped up during the day.

There was some hammering going on in a distant part of the garage, but the hammerer himself was not visible. I had been standing for quite ten minutes in the doorway, staring about me, when suddenly a youth emerged from a small office. He was dressed, from head to foot, in a very dirty and oily garment, made all in one. It was none too carefully buttoned. His hands were almost black, and some of the black had transferred itself to his face. He was smoking a quite short portion of cigarette.

"Want anything?" he said.

"Oh, thank you," I replied, moving forward a little. "I came here by appointment to meet your Mr. Lindsay Mountford."

"Mister 'Oo?"

"Mr. Lindsay Mountford. I believe he is connected with the firm of Milton and Poppett."

"Never 'eard of 'im meself. 'Arry!"

The hammering ceased, and the head of a somewhat elderly man, with a moustache that was probably tawny on Sundays, unexpectedly protruded from a hole in the ground right underneath a large car.

"'Ullo!" replied Harry, rather crossly.

"Know anything of a mister—what name did you say?"

" Lind-say Mount-ford," I repeated, with extreme distinctness.

" We ain't got no one of that name 'ere, 'ave we, 'Arry ? "

" Nah," snarled Harry, and disappeared into his hole. The work of disintegration recommenced.

" Wot wuz the business ? " inquired the one-garmented gentleman.

" I arranged to meet Mr. Mount-ford here at six-thirty in order to inspect a car."

" Wot car ? "

" A secondhand car, called Flick."

" Flick ? " Here he drew his upper lip back from his teeth in a manner that suggested an unpleasant odour. I did not like the facial movement in question.

" That, I am given to understand by Mr. Mount-ford, is the name of the make."

" Flick ! Flick ! " He removed his cap, scratched his head with his little finger—presumably the only clean one—and replaced the cap. " Flick ? Never 'eard of it ! 'Arry ! "

A second time the hammering ceased, and Harry contorted the upper portion of his body out of the hole. It reminded me of the grave-digging scene in " Hamlet."

" 'Ulllo ! 'Ulllo ! " answered Harry, undoubtedly peevish now.

" Know anything of a car called a Flick ? "

" A wot ? "

" Flick."

" Nah ! 'Oo's leg jer think yer pullin' ? "

I approached Harry, who, after all, was the senior man.

"My friend, Mr. Lindsay Mountford," I said, "occupies a prominent position in the motoring world. It is quite possible that he may have heard of a make of car which has not, as yet, come within your experience. In point of fact—I say, in point of fact——"

"I 'eard yer the fust time," muttered Harry, not a genial man.

"—I had an appointment here with Mr. Lindsay Mountford at six-thirty to inspect this car with a view to purchase."

'Purchus?' echoed Harry, open-mouthed.

"Purchus?" whispered the first gentleman, drawing nearer.

"Yes. I am, in fact, a potential buyer of a motor-car."

"Oh!" they cried in chorus, and Harry requested his colleague to give him a hand out of the hole, which subsequently eventuated. They then stood very close to me, one on either side, and breathed heavily. It was clear that my frank statement had made an impression.

"Wot sort of a car did you want?" inquired the younger gentleman tenderly. "We've got a lot 'ere, one way and another."

"Well, not a lot," deprecated Harry. "Don't say a lot, Ted, old man."

(So this was Ted, the excellent young fellow who would teach me to drive. I presumed, of course, that he would thoroughly cleanse himself and don a smart uniform.)

"No, not a lot," corrected Ted, hastily. "But a fairish few. Let me show yer one or two, sir, while yer waiting"

"There can be no harm in that," I acquiesced, "though, of course, I am in honour pledged to consider the Flick first."

"Oh, o' course," they agreed, and led me to a very smart car constructed to hold at least four persons. "Nah, this 'ere," explained Harry, "is a Etna. You've 'eard o' them cars, o' course. Well, 'oo 'asn't, come to that? Nah, this car is the fastest car we got in ahr gerridge, ain't she, Ted?"

"'Sright," agreed Ted.

"She's a six-cylinder car, thirty-forty 'orse, twenty-five mile to the gallon, and extra light on tyres. I drove 'er meself from Penzance in Cornwall ter this gerridge in fourteen 'ahrs, and thet tikes a bit o' beatin', you'll allow. Just step inside, sir, an' see 'ow nice she is to 'andle."

Glad of the opportunity, I climbed into the car, and proudly placed myself in the driver's seat. No sooner had I done so than there came a curious whirring sound, and the whole vehicle trembled in the strangest way. So, to be honest, did I.

I looked quickly at Harry and Ted, but neither of them had touched the car. They were standing, in fact, quite two yards away.

"What is it?" I cried. "What has happened?"

"You got yer foot on the self-starter," shouted Harry.

The self-starter! At any moment the car might have plunged forward and wrought incalculable damage to its fellows, to say nothing of myself! With great presence of mind, however, I leapt from the seat and flung myself over the side. Harry and Ted, desperadoes both, merely laughed.

"You should have warned me!" I expostulated. "It's very dangerous to play foolish tricks of that sort! It's not as though we were foolish lads!"

"You wouldn't 'ave come to no 'arm," explained Harry. "She wasn't in gear."

"She was sufficiently in gear for me, thank you."

"Nah, wot I mean is——"

"Oh, chuck it," cut in Ted. "The gentleman 'asn't got time to waste on yore silliness, 'ave yer, sir?"

"How much time I have," I replied with some hauteur, "depends on my friend Mr. Mountford. What is the price of that car?"

"Gentleman's asking eight hundred for that lot."

"Eight hundred? Eight hundred *pounds*?"

"'Sright. It was a thasand, but 'e's knocked off a couple of 'undred."

I walked away. I felt that I had paled, and I did not wish them to see my face. The calm manner in which these mere mechanics threw hundreds about! What in the world was I, a poor clerk, doing in this galley?

"There's a car 'ere it might be worth yer while lookin' at," said one of them. Both were following me. "A cheaper job, she is, than that other. Owner's a naval gent, and got orders fer abroad. So'rry to part with 'er, o' course, but that's 'ow these bargains come on the market."

He conducted me to a small car with a top to it, windows and all.

"Self-starter," chanted Ted like a catalogue,

"five lamps, three speeds forward and reverse, tool-kit complete with jack, spare wheel and tyre, clock all complete. Done less'n two thahs and mile. W'y not 'op in?"

"No, thank you. I can see the car very nicely from here."

"Oh, but that don't give you no idea. You don't need to touch the self-starter this time. Just try 'ow she is fer length, sir."

He held the door open so invitingly that I had not the heart to refuse. Picking my way gingerly to avoid the self-starter, I got in, and sat down. Ted slammed the door on me, and Harry's face instantly appeared at the opposite window.

"I'll just show you 'ow nice she's sprung!" he shouted.

"Please don't bother!" I begged, not quite understanding. My protestations were too late, however. The face disappeared, and a moment later a violent oscillation occurred which almost flung me to the floor of the car. This continued for quite a long time. I tried to get out, but the catch was some infernal patent, and I was obliged to wait until the terrible rocking ceased. The face of Harry, somewhat reddened, then reappeared at the window.

"Nice, ain't she?" he bawled.

I nodded, at the same time indicating my desire to alight. When I regained *terra firma*, Ted and Harry was gazing at the car in musing fashion, as though they would hate to part with it.

"Surely," I ventured, "what you did can't be good for the springs?"

"Oh, they'd stand a lot more than that," replied Ted. "Before they leaves the works they 'as ten men jumping up and down on these springs."

I good-graciously. It was all I could contribute. Later, as nobody else spoke, I inquired the price.

"Six 'undred, this lot," said Ted.

"Quite," I replied, moving off again in a manner calculated to soften the blow.

Again they followed me. Really, the passionate craving of these motor people to keep me company was almost alarming.

Would Lindsay never come? Was I to be boxed up with these avaricious maniacs the whole evening? It was quite clear that I should never get out without buying something, if it were only a spanner.

Ted was just beseeching me to cast my eye over some other charming "job" when Lindsay arrived. He came in very quickly, very fresh, very bright and eager. He was wearing the same suit. He might never have been to bed at all.

"Hello-ello-ello!" he began in the very doorway. "So you *have* got here! Am I late? So sorry. Had to deliver a sixty Napier up at Hampstead to Lord Glenlivet, and the old boy was so delighted with the job he kept me talking. Evening, Harry. Evening, Ted. Have you shown Mr. Rabbidge the Flick?"

I had turned to look at Harry as this last sentence was being spoken, and a curious expression passed over his face. Quite stolid and puzzled at first, just as it had been when I mentioned the Flick, it suddenly lightened. Strange this power Lindsay

has of driving intelligence into the thickest of heads !

" Oh, *that* one ! " he exclaimed.

" That's the one ! " confirmed Lindsay. " The little job you were showing me last week. I should like Mr. Rabbidge to have a look at her. I think she's just the job he's after."

" Well, there's good stuff in 'er," admitted Harry.

" 'Sright," agreed Ted.

" But, of course, she's not what you might call fully assembled."

What did this mean ? It sounded as though the poor thing was not in full possession of her wits, but I decided to live and learn.

" This way, sir," said Harry, and we all threaded through various cars until we reached a sort of *sanctum sanctorum* at the far end of the garage. My word, but there was a jumble here ! Pipes, wheels, tyres, bits of framework, curiously-shaped vessels and instruments that I had never even dreamed of before, much less seen. King Tut's outer tomb was tidy to this. In the midst of it all was something on trestles that had a rectangular shape, and two wheels at one end. Lindsay, Harry and Ted gathered around this object like people at a graveside, and I thought I might as well join them.

We stood silently for quite a while. Harry looked so solemn I thought he might be about to utter a brief prayer, and, indeed, it would not have been amiss. The whole scene suggested something to my mind, something rather sad, that I could not quite place.

" Well ? " said Lindsay at last.

They all looked at me expectantly, and at that instant, like a flash, it came to me.

"I know!" I cried excitedly. "I know what this place reminds me of!"

"What?" they asked in chorus.

"A railway accident."

There was quite a long pause, broken by Ted, who gave a sudden gasp and went away, holding his stomach in both hands. We could hear him at intervals for a long time afterwards, in different parts of the garage, making explosive noises like a water-pipe that needs attention.

But Lindsay and Harry were perfectly grave. They simply looked from me to the Thing, and then back at me.

"I don't quite understand," said Lindsay at last, in icy tones.

"Oh, I meant no harm," I explained. "You know those terrible pictures one sometimes sees in the papers of railway accidents—wheels all the wrong way up and masses of tubes and pipes and steel rods? Well, that's what came into my head. I'm sorry if I've offended anybody."

"This," observed Lindsay, still more icily, "is the Flick."

"*This*?" Was he lengthening my limbs? No, his face was stolid in the extreme. "I don't understand, my dear fellow. This isn't a car at all!"

"It's the chassis," explained Harry, making the "h" hard, as in chalk. He also sounded the final "s," as in gas.

"The what?" I ventured.

"The chassis," said Lindsay. "My friend," he added to Harry, "is not yet an expert motorist."

I would be glad if you would point out to him some of the merits of this car."

It seemed to me a dastardly request, but Harry was not daunted by it. He stepped up to what I presume had been the engine, and laid his hand on it affectionately.

"Cert'nly, sir. This 'ere engine is ten-'orse pahr. Water-cooled, pre-war design. She'll do forty mile per, and never turn a 'air. (I won't bother the gent with revs. nor yet with bore an' stroke. 'E'll find all those out later.) All the work and mater'll in this car is pre-war. They don't *make* cars like this terdye simply fer the reason as they ain't got nor can't get the mater'll. The only way as they can get it is ter take it off another car same as this 'ere. The fryme-work is all solid steel as you can see fer yerself and pre-war at that. The gears is three for'ard and reverse. You 'ave a 'and-brake and foot-brake—both pre-war. The steerin'-rod is solid steel throughout."

"Pre-war?" I asked, hoping to seem intelligent.

"Certainly!" snapped Harry.

"I'm sorry, only you didn't mention it that time."

"One cawn't mention it hevery time! But you may take it from me as heverything in this car as she stands 'ere is pre-war, barrin' a nut or two which we may 'ave added since. Is there any further queschun as you'd like to ask, sir, now I *am* 'ere?"

"Ask anything you like," encouraged Lindsay.

"We want you to be quite satisfied."

"Well," I ventured timidly, having been snubbed

so often, "at present I see only two wheels. I presume the Flick has the—er—usual number?"

Unlucky again! Harry thought I was trying to be sarcastic, and paid me back in my own coin.

"Yes," he said affectedly, with an Oxford accent, "there are four wheels to this automobile. There are two at the front and two at the back, or two on the near side and two on the hoff, whichever you prefer."

I smiled, thinking to pacify him, but secretly I hoped that all motor mechanics were not so touchy as this one.

"Where's the body?" asked Lindsay suddenly.

"Don't be gruesome," I pleaded.

"In the shed at the back," returned Harry, growling.

"Shall we go and look at it?"

"If you like," I said softly.

Harry, for all the world like the foreman of a jury, led the way; I followed, and Lindsay brought up the rear. There was no possibility of escape.

It was very dark in the shed. Even Harry, who must have known every inch of the place, had some difficulty in finding the body.

"I knows we 'ad it 'ere a few weeks ago," he muttered, "'cos I seen it meself."

We discovered it at last, suspended from the ceiling with cords. At least, Harry and Lindsay said it was the body, and of course I took their word for it. To my unsophisticated eyes it looked more like a discarded cucumber frame.

"Ah, there we are!" cried Harry. "I knowed it couldn't be fur off."

" It's a cosy little job," observed Lindsay, reaching up and tapping it with his cane.

" I suppose that used to fit quite neatly on to the chassis ? " I asked.

Harry stared.

" My dear fellow," Lindsay assured me, " the Flick coachwork is famous in the motoring world. The finish is extraordinary."

" This one has certainly come to an extraordinary finish," I agreed.

" Sorry," said Lindsay, " but we haven't time to be funny."

" Funny ? My dear Lindsay, you're very irascible this evening ! I had no intention of being funny, but you can't deny——"

" You implied, Rabbidge, that this very excellent body was finished and done for."

" Well, isn't it ? Hanging there, I mean."

" All bodies are kept like that when not in use. To-morrow we'll have this one down and you shall examine it more closely. I don't say that a lick of paint wouldn't improve it, but otherwise it's as good as new."

" The advantage of keepin' 'em slung up like that there," put in Harry, " is the rats can't get at 'em. Many a good body lef' on the floor I've seen fair chewed ter nothink be rats. But there ain't a rat-ole in this not as big as a sixpence, I'll lay."

" You think they may have just nibbled it ? "

" Couldn't sye fer certing as they 'aven't," but yore buyin' a second-hand car, don' fergit. When we've got them there wheels on, and shone up the metal-work a bit, and screwed the body on, and given 'er a lick of paint, an' oiled 'er, and gen'rally

put 'er in comish., she'll be one of the nicest and 'andiest little bits o' work on the road. Isn't that right, sir ? "

"The gentleman shall judge for himself tomorrow," pronounced Lindsay. "Can you be here the same time, old man ? Good. Ted'll take you out for a trial run."

CHAPTER III

A RIDE WITH TED

JUNE 9. — I am not, I hope, deficient in physical courage, but I feel that I ought to go down on my knees and offer up thanks for the mere fact of being alive to write once more in this journal.

I have been for a ride in the Flick with Ted.

Put like that, in those few simple words, it seems nothing. When I describe to you what actually took place—if my pen proves sufficiently eloquent—you will turn as pale as I feel sure I did, and clutch as convulsively to the arms of your chair as I clutched the sides of my well-named "bucket" seat.

Mind 'you, I never expected to go out at all. I really took it for one of Lindsay's jokes when he told me to be at the garage at six-thirty in order that Ted might take me for a trial run. Even supposing, I mean, that the car would move at all under its own volition, it was all in bits. Two wheels were missing, and half of it was hanging to the roof of the shed to make it more difficult for the rats.

I went to bed, therefore, and slept more or less peacefully. I don't say I ever sleep very soundly just now. When a man is about to be married, especially to a girl like Muriel, he is apt to lie awake and wonder if he is really worthy.

There is something very superior about Muriel. I inscribe that in the very nicest sense. If you could see her for five minutes you would know what I mean. She has a way of walking, and talking, and hailing a bus, and giving orders to shopmen and so forth which is almost queenly. Well, quite queenly, because I dare say there have been queens in the past who were not nearly so dignified as Muriel. How she ever came to take notice of a quiet fellow like me I cannot imagine, unless she is impressed by my devotion.

I would do anything in the world for Muriel. This very day, for instance, I risked my neck for her, the ultimate idea being to surprise her by driving up to their door in my very own car.

I reached Milton and Poppett's garage at 6.25. Harry was waiting for me in the doorway.

"'Ere 'e is!" he shouted, and then, turning, touched his cap. Strange condescension for a motor expert.

"Good evening," I said, and added smilingly, "Is the Rolls-Royce ready?"

Harry did not return the smile. "Ted's just tunin' 'er up," was his unexpected reply.

"You don't mean to say you've got her collected?"

"We *assembled* 'er fust thing this morning. She'll look a treat when she's 'ad a lick o' paint. O' course, we ain't 'ad no time not yet ter mike 'er look dossy. You'll 'ave t' allow for that."

"Certainly," I assured him. "I am a fair-minded man. So you found the other two wheels?"

"The other two wheels was never missin',"

snapped Harry. " You keep talkin' abaht them other two wheels as though we was trying to sell the car without 'em. We don't do things like that in this shop. Every car goes out complete or not at all."

" Good ! " I cried, with a friendly rubbing of the hands. " Good ! Good ! "

Our conversation was interrupted at this point by a blood-curdling noise from within the garage. I can't exactly describe it, not having the pen of a Conrad or a Maeterlinck, but it was something between the roar of a railway-engine and the scream of a hyena.

" Good heavens ! " I allowed myself—and I am not often profane. " What's that ? "

" On'y ole Ted," said Harry, quite unmoved.

" Hadn't we better rush to the rescue ? He may be involved in some machinery."

" 'E's on'y tunin' 'er up."

" Tuning what up ? The Flick ? "

" 'Sright."

" But will she always make that noise before starting ? "

" Not 'er—on'y when you bring 'er rahnd 'ere."

" You speak as though she were a live thing ? "

" She'll be lively enough time Ted's finished with 'er."

He entered the garage, and I, somewhat timidly, followed. The place was full of smoke, through which I discerned Ted poring over what I later discovered to be the Flick. His face and hands were covered with black oil. He was still dressed in the all-in-one garment, and still chewing the diminutive portion of cigarette.

As we approached he did something particularly vicious to the poor little car, which again emitted that blood-curdling shriek. Harry nodded approvingly.

"Seems awright," he said.

"Firin' a treat," answered Ted.

"Sounds nice an' smooth."

"Silk—that's what she is."

"Purrs like velvet," added Harry to me.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say she purrs like velvet."

"Oh! Quite! Quite!" Though how velvet could purr I was at a loss to understand. It occurred to me that he might mean "paws," but I sought safety in silence.

Ted, just as he was, now climbed into the driver's seat. There were two or three cars between him and the exit, but Harry twisted their steering wheels about very expertly whilst I pushed, and we soon had a nice clear space. The exercise made me perspire profusely, but Harry and Ted were quite cool.

"Ready?" asked Ted, looking at me.

"Are we off?" I countered, to gain time.

"That's the idea."

"This string doesn't look very firm," I objected, pointing to one of the methods adopted for keeping the body attached to the chassis.

"Firm as a rock," retorted Harry, giving it a savage tug. He had clearly loosened it further, so I said no more, but asked Ted if I should fetch his hat. I had hoped that he would remove the all-in-one garment, and wash his face and hands, but did not like to suggest these improvements.

" 'E don' want no 'at," said Harry. " You won't go fur."

That seemed the most cheerful thing I had heard yet. My heart softened towards Harry, who was not such a bad fellow after all, and I smiled my thanks. The next moment I took my seat, and, with a really terrible scream, that must have been heard for miles, we shot out of the garage.

So far as I was concerned, the ride nearly came to a conclusion then and there, for the seat in which I was sitting had not been very securely fixed, and the sudden movement tilted me backwards. My legs went up in the air, and I saw Harry, for the first time, over the top of my head.

" Woa ! " he shouted. " 'Arf a mo', Ted ! "

Ted pulled up so suddenly that the seat returned to its normal position of its own volition, and I was within an ace of shooting head first over the bonnet of the car. I saved myself by clutching at Ted, which caused him to do something to the wheel which brought us in close proximity to one of those large carts employed by the Urban District Council for the removal of rubbish. The horse reared up on its hind legs, as well it might, poor thing, and the driver had much ado to pacify it with curious oaths.

This accomplished, he found himself quite close to Ted. In fact, they could easily have kissed each other, but the Urban District Council men have their official position to consider.

" Wot in 'ell d'you think you're doin' ? " he said, not pleasantly.

I hoped Ted would reply in a conciliatory tone, but I was disappointed.

"Ole muck-'eap," was his selection.

"Stink-box!" contributed the Urban District Council.

"'Ere's something in yore line," observed Ted, and pitched the end of his cigarette into the cart. "You can 'ave that," he added suavely.

The Urban District Council looked at the Flick.

"Box o' dirty sardine-tins," was his comment. "Better shove it in my cart."

"I might if I could trust yer with a banana-skin," returned Ted, upon which the Flick screamed again, went backwards a little, headed down the street, and away we went.

"First lesson in driving," said Ted. "Never take no sauce from nobody."

"But weren't we in the wrong?" I ventured.

"Not us. I never touched 'im. Road's free to all, I take it."

"Quite. This seat of mine is a little loose, I'm afraid."

"I told the lad ter screw it down but 'e never done it. You can't trust these lads since the war, not any of 'em."

This conversation, I must tell you, was punctuated by hairbreadth escapes every few yards. The evening, unfortunately, was fine, and the roads thronged with innocent pleasure-seekers. Whatever else had been forgotten, the electric horn had not. Ted had but to press a knob, which he did repeatedly, and the singular contrivance made a noise exactly like some antediluvian monster about to be ill. Whereupon young ladies who had been gazing lovingly into the eyes of their swains would leap high into the air, displaying all sorts of subtle

and obviously private contrivances for looking neat, whilst the swains would clutch at their hats and follow our retreat with streams of abusive language which I could never bring myself to place on record.

I have no wish to do Ted an injustice, but it soon became clear to me that that young man was either less or more than human. He appeared to have no regard for life or limb whatever. One could have understood, in a measure, his indifference to the sufferings of mere pedestrians, but it was obvious that both his own neck and mine had even less value in his eyes.

He drove as though we were both immortal. It is impossible for anyone, I don't care who it is, to see through a brick wall, yet Ted would swing round corners without slackening speed in the slightest, or even taking the trouble to sound the electric horn.

Time after time we were within a few inches of smashing into other vehicles, yet he avoided actual collision with a dexterous jerk of the wrist, and never even alluded to the occurrence in conversation. All his remarks, in fact, were in fulsome praise of the Flick.

One incident I shall never forget. We were driving through a particularly narrow thoroughfare—so narrow that no other vehicle could have passed us had we met one. Incautiously, I said something about the steering apparatus. I think I expressed a hope that it was all in order.

"Steer?" echoed Ted. "Easy as butter! I'll show yer!"

He was holding the wheel, very carelessly, with

one hand. Before I could realise his intention, he proceeded to waggle the wheel backwards and forwards in a most rapid and dangerous manner, with the result that we swerved from side to side all down that narrow street, frequently striking the kerb on either side with our tyres.

"See that?" asked Ted.

"Yes!" I assured him. "Yes, yes! Beautiful!" But he still went on doing it.

"Look!" he admonished. "One finger!"

"Quite! Very nice! I'm quite convinced!"

"She'd stand on 'er 'ead, this car would."

"I'm sure of it. Take care! Mind that old woman!"

"Which one?"

"That one! Look out! . . . Good Lord! I thought you'd struck her!"

"Bit nervy, ain't you?" commented Ted. "I was a clear two inches off that ole gal."

"But, surely, two inches is not enough for safety?"

"Ample. When you get to a sixteenth of an inch, that's a bit risky."

I began to see that there was more in driving a motor than met the eye.

"I'll just show you how she brakes," said Ted.

"Good," I replied, little dreaming what was in his mind.

By this time we were more or less clear of the houses. Ted turned into a by-road, and we suddenly found ourselves on the brow of a precipitous hill. It was not a long hill, but extremely steep. It ended, moreover, in a blank wall.

"Taken a wrong turning," I observed, comfortably.

"Oh, no. This is one of our test 'ills."

"You don't mean you're going down here?"

"Certingly. You want ter see 'ow she brakes, don't yer?"

"No, thank you. I don't really mind how she brakes. I'm sure she does it very well. I'll take your word for it."

"Yes, and then round on me if anything gives way when yer out on yer own. I come 'ere on purpose to show you 'ow she brakes. You'll be surprised."

I was now perfectly convinced that the man was mad. I was out in this funny little car with a raving lunatic. He was clearly annoyed that we had escaped death so often in the streets, and was determined to make sure this time.

Should I leap overboard while there was yet an opportunity? I calculated the chances, but the descent had already commenced. Every second the car gained speed. It was merely a choice of deaths—a lonely one, due to the contact of my skull with a stone, or death in company with Ted. I decided, almost instinctively, that I would crash with him into the brick wall at the bottom of the hill.

We roared forward. The Flick swayed unpleasantly. There was no speedometer, but I remember calculating that our pace must be fully sixty miles an hour. No brakes in the world would do it. We were lost. We were as good as dead. The wall came rushing to meet us.

I closed my eyes, and made use of a short prayer especially suitable for occasions of this sort. I had

used it once before in my life, but nothing like so fervently as I used it now. . . .

The next thing I remember is travelling through the air without any car at all! I cleared the brick wall, which was a low one, and landed on some soft mould which an old man, as luck would have it, had just dug over. It was, in point of fact, an allotment.

For some moments I lay there, uncertain whether I was dead or alive. Presently, realising that I was still alive, and apparently unhurt, I sat up and looked about me. The old man in whose allotment I had landed was leaning on his spade, chewing nothing with toothless gums. He made no attempt to help me up. Neither did he protest. Just stood there and watched me as though I were a curious bird that had alighted on his allotment.

Then a head appeared over the wall, the face in front of it being Ted's. The usual small portion of cigarette—I never saw him with a complete one—was stuck between his lips.

"'Ullo!" he said. "Yore a nice one, you are!"

I was too astounded to reply. True to his standard of conduct, the standard, I fear, of all professional motorists, he was accusing me of acting wrongly in leaving the car!

"Wot you want to do that for! I told you I was goin' ter show you 'ow she braked."

I got up, slowly, and felt myself all over. I extended both my arms, carefully, and drew them in again. They were unbroken. I did the same with my legs, one at a time. These, too, were unbroken. I turned my head, carefully, first to the right and then to the left. My neck was intact.

I had flown over a brick wall and was still alive to tell the tale !

My bowler hat was lying some distance away. I picked it up and approached the old man, who still leant on his spade.

"Sir," I said, "I am extremely sorry to have landed so unceremoniously on your nicely-dug earth. The fact is I came down the hill on the far side of that wall in a motor-car. I mention that because you may have mistaken me for an aviator. I am not. I had no intention of leaving the car. How I accomplished it I have no idea, but it is quite clear that I am trespassing and I beg your pardon."

The old man said not a word. Thinking he might be deaf and dumb, I pushed the crown of my bowler into something like shape, and prepared to leave the allotment. Then, and not till then, the owner intervened.

"'Ere," he said, and beckoned with his head.

I went a little nearer to him.

"'Ere," he repeated.

I drew to within a yard of him. "Yes?" I inquired. "You wished to speak to me?"

"That'll be ninepence," said the old man.

Ninepence! It seemed a strange sum, but not extravagant. I put my hand in my pocket and found a shilling, which I handed to him. The old man, as though there were a standard charge for this sort of thing, gravely produced threepence change. Then he resumed his digging.

Ted helped me over the wall. The Flick was apparently intact, though the road showed traces of her sudden stoppage.

"'Urt yerself?" he asked.

"No," I replied, "but that is no credit to you. Good evening."

I started to walk up the hill. Before I had gone five yards Ted called after me in genuine surprise.

"'Ere! 'Arf a mo!"

I turned. For the first time since we had met his face wore an almost human expression.

"Well?" I replied sternly.

"You ain't got the needle, 'ave yer?"

"I don't know precisely what the needle may be, or exactly where one gets it. But if you wish to ascertain whether I am annoyed at your conduct, I have no hesitation in replying in the affirmative. You are apparently not aware that I occupy a position of no little responsibility in the City. I may not be an expert on automobiles, but that is no excuse for behaving as though my life were of no value to the community. I may further inform you that I am engaged to be married to a very charming and distinguished young lady whose father is a man of considerable wealth. In short, I am a person of importance, and to be treated as such. I wish you, once again, good evening."

For the second time, I stalked off. But Ted, genuinely alarmed by this time, ran after me.

"You can't walk 'ome," he said earnestly.

"I both can and shall," I assured him.

"But you can't—not if yore all those things wot you said."

"And why not, pray?"

"Becos yore trousers is tore at the back."

Hastily I proved to myself that he was speaking the truth. They were very much torn at the back.

What was to be done? There was no traffic in this direction. Besides, any public vehicle was clearly out of the question.

"Will you promise to drive very carefully if I come with you?"

"Cert'nly I will. I'm not a reckless driver, mind."

"May I see your licence?"

"Oh well, that!" he said scornfully.

"May I see it?"

Reluctantly, he produced it. For specimens of variations in handwriting, it was unique. There was hardly a blank portion visible. The wretched fellow had been fined on all possible dates, at all possible places, and every sort of sum from ten pounds downwards.

I began to understand.

"The perlice," said Ted, as we crawled up the hill in the Flick, "is the dirtiest dogs in this country. Instead of motorin' bein' a pleasure it's a constant expense, and all owin' ter the perlice. They treat you like you was a crim'nal!"

"Don't get excited," I answered. "It makes you press too heavily on the exhilarator."

CHAPTER IV

A LESSON IN DRIVING

JUNE 12.—Lindsay Mountford is really a most unusual and extraordinary person. The very day after my terrible ride with Ted, when I took a flying journey over a brick wall and landed in an allotment, the fellow actually turned up at my rooms as though nothing out of the common had taken place. I was taking tea at the time, and reading a very beautiful little poem in my much-prized "Anthology of Golden Thoughts."

"Hallo!" he cried. "How's the dashing sportsman?"

"If you mean me," I said icily, "I am suffering from severe contusions on the body and shock to the mind. I have no desire to enter into conversation with anybody. Please go away."

He did nothing of the kind. He simply laid his hat and stick on a side table, dropped into a chair, and kindled a cigarette. I went on reading.

"Now, look here, Rabbit, old fellow," he opened.

"Kindly refrain from calling me that."

"Righto. Leonard, then. My dear, good old Lenny, I have simply come to tell you what they think about you at Milton and Poppett's."

"I have no desire to know. It is sufficient for me that I have my own opinion about them."

" Well, of course, Leonardo, I don't know what your opinion of them may be, but they regard you as a hero."

The page of verse danced before my eyes. Was it possible? Was I, at last, verging on the dashing? It was true enough that I had dashed through the air and into that allotment.

" Nonsense ! " I retorted, raising the book a trifle to hide my smile of natural gratification.

" It isn't nonsense, Lenny. All the motorists in the neighbourhood are talking about your wonderful *sang-froid*."

" How do they know about it ? "

" Ted, of course. Ted says he's seen many a motoring accident——"

" I can well believe that ! "

" —but never in his career has he seen a gentleman take a toss so neatly and carry the thing off with such perfect *aplomb*."

" Did Ted use that word ? "

" No, not that precise word, but that was what he meant. He says that your dialogue with the old man who was digging in the allotment was better than anything he ever heard at the Camberwell Theatre of Varieties. He says he knew you were a sport all along, but he never guessed you were a wit as well."

I looked at Lindsay over the top of my book. His face shone with genuine hero-worship. There was not a trace of banter or vulgar chaff in it.

" Well," I admitted, " if it comes to that, I suppose I *did* carry off the situation rather well. It was a little awkward, of course."

" My priceless old gem, it was one of the most

thrilling things I ever heard. Have you told Muriel ? ”

“ Not yet ? I didn’t wish to alarm her.”

“ Quite right. I wouldn’t say a word about it till the car is yours.”

“ The car ? You don’t suggest that I should still——”

“ Suggest ? I took it all as settled. You **know** now what the car can do.”

“ I certainly do.”

“ Oh, but that won’t happen again. It’s never happened before, even to Ted. The brakes were much fiercer than he thought——”

“ Fierce comes nowhere near it. They were ravenous.”

“ Exactly. But we’ve had a go at them, and now they’re as gentle as oiled butter. You see, the car hadn’t been out for some little time——”

“ Not for many years, I should say.”

“ I don’t know exactly how long, but she’s all the better for that. A good long rest is a wonderful thing for a car. They’re awfully human, you know.”

“ The Flick is.”

“ She’s a marvel. My dear Lenny, I want you to look me straight in the eye. That’s right. Now, do you think I would lie to you about that car ? ”

“ I - I hope not,” was my guarded rejoinder.

“ You know I wouldn’t. You know I *couldn’t*. You’re a man of the world. You go to the City every day. You have already shown marvellous instinct about motor mechanism. Even if I wanted to deceive you, which I don’t, it would be impossible. Listen. You’re getting that car dirt cheap.”

" I don't know that I'm getting it at all."

" But I do. Now, I've come here this evening with a sporting offer. I wouldn't for the world have you buy a car that you didn't really like, so I'll tell you what I've arranged. You shall test the car for yourself."

A strange, shivering sensation spread through my limbs.

" My dear Lindsay," I retorted, " you're talking nonsense. You know very well I have no experience as a driver."

" I do, but we must all begin some time. Even *I* wasn't born in a car. Neither was Ted. We had to learn. Well, you shall learn. Ted will teach you. The first lesson is fixed for to-morrow evening at six-thirty."

" Thank you very much, but that's impossible. To-morrow evening is my Entomology Class at the Camberwell Institute."

Never had I been so thankful for my interest in Science. " We are to have a most thrilling discourse, with lantern slides, on the home life of the Ant."

" Oh, damn ants ! " said Lindsay morosely.

" Not at all. We can learn a great deal from ants."

" You'd learn more from Ted."

" With less comfort to my personal being."

" All right. I shall make it the next night. I'm only thinking of your future happiness, old boy. Which do you imagine more likely to appeal to Muriel—ants or a motor-car ? "

This hit me in a weak spot, and the rascal knew it. Muriel has no love for the insect world. She

rather jeers at all things that creep. Lindsay followed up his advantage, promising me, on his solemn word of honour, that Ted would take no liberties. In the end, I actually engaged myself to take my first lesson in driving this very evening.

And I have done it. My hand still shakes as I pen these words, but I have done it. *I have driven a motor-car!*

I will not dwell on the agonies I suffered throughout the day. I have been in for examinations. I have proposed to Muriel. I have done all sorts of things requiring much mental and nervous exhaustion. But I doubt if I shall ever pass a more suspensive day than this.

Before going round to the garage for the great adventure, I had a very sad duty to perform. At least, I regarded it as a duty. In case of the worst happening, I said good-bye to Muriel. Of course, she did not know what I was doing, and I could not let her know, but I knew. It was a one-sided affair, which, to me, made it all the more pathetic.

I got off from the office an hour earlier on purpose. I had wired Muriel at lunch-time and made the appointment at her father's house. I found her puzzled and excited.

"Hullo!" she welcomed. "What's in the wind now?"

I took her gently by the hand and led her to a couch. I felt sure she must think I was going to break off the engagement, but the English Girl never winced.

"Little woman," I said, "I have come to ask you a question."

"Fire ahead," replied Muriel.

" You will answer truthfully ? "

" All depends. Is this a new game ? "

" No, no ! A very old one."

" Aren't you being rather dramatic ? "

" Am I ? I am sorry if I am. I want to be light, yet sincere—gay, yet not shallow. Above all, I have no desire to distress you."

" Has something happened, Leonard ? "

" Not yet. I mean——"

" Is something going to happen ? "

" I hope not. Sincerely, my dear, I hope not."

" Then something may happen ? "

" It may or it mayn't. Always. At any time. Life is like that."

" This is gibberish. If you drank, I should be suspicious."

" My dear Muriel ! "

" All right. I know you don't. Besides, you couldn't without my knowing it. Then what on earth is the matter ? You said something about a question."

" I did. I am about to put it to you. Muriel, if anything happened to me before we were married——"

" What could happen to you ? You lead as safe a life as any man in London."

Poor girl ! and the Flick at this moment being warmed up !

" But if it did. You never know. A banana-skin—a bus—smack ! All over with your poor Leonard."

" You want a tonic, old boy. You're getting run down."

" Perhaps. But let me put my question. It will ease my mind. If anything happened to me before

we were married, would you believe that I did it all for the best ? ”

“ Did all what for the best ? ”

“ What I did do—whatever it was.”

“ Well, that’s rather a tall order. Are you thinking of doing anything out of the ordinary ? ”

“ Eh ? ”

“ You heard what I said. Leonard, your manner is most suspicious. You’re concealing something ! You haven’t robbed the till, have you ? ”

“ Muriel ! ”

“ I don’t care. They say men do very strange things on the eve of matrimony. *Have* you robbed the till ? ”

“ There *is* no till.” My head was on my chest. This was not at all what I expected.

“ Well, then, the safe ? Or the desk ? Or whatever your people keep their money in ? Are you expecting to be arrested ? Is that it ? ”

What could I answer ? I might easily be arrested. Motorists are often arrested. I decided to carry the whole business off with an air and then escape. I began to doubt my wisdom in making the appointment at all.

“ My dear,” I said, rising, and laying one hand on her shoulder, “ my lips for the moment are sealed. But I am doing nothing dishonest, nothing of which you would be ashamed. Ere long you shall know all. In the meantime, I ask you to believe—to believe—to believe—to believe that—— ! ”

Emotion choked me, I rushed from the house.

By the time I turned up at the garage I was faint, trembling, and sick at heart—and elsewhere.

Ted led me to the Flick. She had had her lick

of paint, and I was really surprised at the difference in her appearance.

" Before we start drivin'," began Ted, " I'll just explain the engine a bit and then you'll know what to do in a 'mergency."

" But will there be an emergency? Mr. Lindsay assured me——"

" Oh, no, there won't be nothing o' that. But it's best to un'erstan' something about yer engine, just in case. Now these are yer gears—three forward an' reverse. This is yer side-brake and this yer foot-brake. This 'ere is the clutch and this the accelerator. 'Ere you 'ave yer throttle-lever and 'ere yer spark. The startin'-'andle, as you know, is in front. Now don't never start yer engine until you've made sure as she's in nootral. Retard yer spark, and give 'er one or two turns over before you switch on, jest to get the juice into the cylinders. Then swing 'er round, steady yer engine, and off you go. 'Op up."

" Wait a moment, if you please. What did you say was the first thing to do—I mean, the very first? "

" See as she's in nootral."

" Where is nootral? "

" Nootral? In the middle of the gate, o' course." I looked about me. No gate was visible.

" I'm sorry," I said, " but I see no gate."

" Bein' a bit funny, ain't yer? "

" Certainly not. I am merely an earnest student of the mechanism——"

" 'Ere---'ere's yer gate."

" That little thing with notches in it? "

" 'Sright. Now, I'll tell you once again and please

ter pay attention. This is first, this 'ere second, that's top, and that's reverse. Wot you 'ave ter do is to run through yer gears, see ? ”

“ In my mind ? ”

“ In yer mind nothing ! ”

“ I beg your pardon ? ”

“ I said, in yer mind my foot.”

Jargon ! Unintelligible jargon ! But I let it pass. Ted was getting cross, and we were going out together.

“ You must run through yer gears with yer lever.”

“ Which is the lever ? ”

“ This, my lad ! This bloomin' thing 'ere ! Look ! First second top reverse. An' don't you never go shovin' 'er in reverse when you want to go for'ard or you'll be for it.”

“ It ? What shall I be for ? ”

“ Fer yer long last blighty. Now you get up an' I'll start 'er.”

He went to the front portion of the Flick and swung the handle round with astonishing energy. Suddenly the engine gave vent to her now familiar scream.

“ Throttle 'er down ! ” yelled Ted.

“ Do what ? ”

“ Throttle 'er down like I told yer ! She's racin' ! ”

She was doing nothing of the kind. The car, save for a violent trembling, was perfectly motionless.

“ Don't ler 'er ryce, I tell yer ! Throttle 'er down ! Push the blinkin' lever over ! ”

At any rate, I remembered the lever. Seizing it firmly, I thrust it into one of the little notches.

To my surprise, the car began to move forward, and Ted was very nearly a dead man! With amazing agility, however, he leapt out of the way, rushed at the Flick, did one or two things with the certainty of the expert, and brought the vehicle to a halt.

He then turned and regarded me with withering scorn.

"Wot in (something dreadfully strong) 'ell," he asked, "did you go and do that for?"

"I'm sorry if you were frightened," I answered soothingly.

"Frightened? Well! If that don't take it! D'you know you near as a toucher 'ad me runned over?"

"If it comes to that," I had to remind him, "you shot me over a wall."

"Yes, but I never done it for the purpose."

"And I didn't start the car on purpose."

"You put her in gear, anyway!"

"I only did as you told me."

"I told you to throttle 'er back to stop 'er from rycin'."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Edward. You told me to push the lever over."

"Yes, but not the *gear* lever!"

"You didn't specify which lever was in your mind."

"And you thought it was the gear-lever, eh?"

"I have no pretensions to being an expert on machinery. In fact, nobody could be more ignorant of machinery than myself. I suggest that we cancel the lesson, and I shall then have a nice hour with my butterfly-net."

"Yore wot?"

"Butterfly-net. Have you never known the delight of chasing a Painted Lady?"

"We're gettin' a bit off the track," was Ted's answer. "I'll start 'er up again, an' don't you touch nothing till I come round."

Once more the awful screams, for all the world like an animal caught in a gin, but this time Ted checked them somewhat by moving a little lever on the steering-wheel which I had not previously noticed. He then told me to climb into the driver's seat.

The moment had come. I was to drive a car! I would have loved a nice photograph to give to Muriel, but that must wait.

"Now," instructed Ted, hopping into the seat alongside, "don't forget to do exactly what I say. First of all, press down yer clutch."

"Which is the clutch?" I was trembling so violently that I doubted my capacity to control my limbs.

"That 'ere pedal this side. Go on! Press it down! It won't bite yer!"

I pressed. It was astonishing how stiff the thing was.

"Now slip your gear-lever in where you 'ad it just now."

"In that l-l-little n-n-notch?"

"That's right. Not cold, are yer?"

"Just a little."

"Is it in? Good. Now take your foot slowly off the clutch and she'll start."

"You really want me to start?"

"Why, o' course. We can't sit 'ere all night."

" But I shan't know what to do when she starts ! "

" Steer 'er—that's all."

A sudden thought occurred to me ; I had not taken the precaution to secure a driving-licence ! Struck by this recollection, I turned to mention the fact to Ted, and in doing so removed my left foot from the clutch. To my intense astonishment, the car lurched forward ! We were off !

" Look where yer goin' ! " yelled Ted. " Keep 'er strite ! Don't never let yer clutch in with a jerk like that ! "

" Am I—am I driving ? " I managed to gasp.

" Well, I dunno as you could call it that," retorted Ted, " but nobody else is. It's up to you."

The road outside the garage was a quiet one. There was no traffic at this time of the evening, so I allowed myself both sides of it. Even then, so much influence had that small wheel, we struck the kerb several times, now this side, now that.

" Chynge up ! " ordered Ted.

" Do what ? "

" Chynge up ! Slip 'er into second ! "

" But I want both hands to steer with ! "

" Not you. I'll keep 'er strite. Push yer clutch out ! "

Absurd as it may seem, for the life of me I could not remember at that moment which *was* the clutch ! I knew it was one of the things on the floor, and that was all. So I pushed at something, and the car came to a sudden halt. The engine stopped. All was peace.

Leaning back, I sighed with satisfaction. I had driven and survived !

" Wot's the idea ? " asked Ted, wonderingly.

" We've stopped."

" Yes, I can see that. But wot for ? "

" Oh, just for a change." I was so happy to be motionless that I felt quite witty.

" But you don't need to stop for a chynge," explained the literal Ted. " We shall never get nowhere at that rate. All you want to do is to slip your clutch out, slip into second gear, let in yer clutch agin, 'celerate, and drive on. See ? "

" It sounds very complicated."

" Not when you get used to it. Easy as pie ! I shall 'ave to get down and start the engine again. Is she in nootral ? "

" I think so."

" No, she ain't. You're at that old trick again ! Slip 'er into nootral and shove on yer side-brake."

" Which is 'he side-brake ? "

" Well, which d'yer think ? There's only two 'andles - one's the gear-lever an' the other the side-brake."

" Oh, yes, I see. Thank you very much. And how do I apply it ? "

" Pull it towards yer . . . 'Sright. Now. don't touch nothink, mind, till I come back."

Off once more. I think we stopped ten or a dozen times before I managed to change gear, and then it was not wholly to Ted's satisfaction. He muttered something about double-clutching, which I judged to be quite outside my capabilities, and therefore paid no attention to it.

I soon discovered that, by proceeding very slowly, say four miles an hour, it was not so difficult to drive as I had imagined. True, a number of small boys kept pace with us on foot, asked where the

body was concealed, and threatened to report me to the police for furious loitering, but I put up with all that. "Safety first" was my motto. Three objects I had in mind—(1) to keep off the pavement, (2) get the lesson over, and (3) get home.

There were a few more unfortunate incidents, of course, two of which I might record for the benefit of other tyros. The first occurred at a moment when we were overtaking a cart laden with farm-waste. Had I been left to my own judgment, we should not have overtaken it at all. I mean to say, I am not one of those people who take delight in rushing over the roads at a helter-skelter pace, raising clouds of dust, and spoiling the beauty of the evening for cyclists and pedestrians. When in low gear, it seems, you can drive as slowly as you please, and I was quite content to follow the cart at two to three miles an hour.

Not so the impatient, reckless Ted.

"Get past 'er," he instructed. (Everything is feminine to Ted, even a farm-cart.)

"I can't," I retorted. "He's in the middle of the road."

"Well, sound yer 'orn!"

"Which is the horn?"

"That knob there! Press it down sharp!"

You may remember that I have already described the effect of this knob-pressing. I pressed it sharply, and the antediluvian monster gurgitated in a disgusting and an appalling manner. Whereupon the animal pulling the cart started violently and swerved across the road. To avoid a collision, I pulled hard at the steering-wheel, the result being that we crossed the pavement and unexpectedly

entered the garden of a private dwelling. An old gentleman who was attending to his roses came rapidly towards us, scissors in hand and straw hat on back of head.

"What the devil's the meaning of this?" he shouted. "What are you doing in my garden?"

I stood up in my place and raised my hat.

"Sir," I opened, "I must ask you to pardon this seeming liberty."

"Pardon be damned!" roared the old gentleman. "Get out of my garden or I'll send for the police!"

"Certainly, sir," I assured him. "I had no intention of entering, but these vehicles are not always under full control."

"So I see! Or the drivers!"

Here Ted, true to his creed, must needs cut in.

"Steady on, old cock!" he foolishly interrupted. "We're no more drunk than what you are!"

The old gentleman seemed winded by this. He paused for breath, and then ran at full speed towards his house.

"Quick!" cried Ted. "'E's gorn ter phone fer the p'leece!"

He leapt down.

"Shove 'er in reverse!" he yelled, apparently forgetting my inexperience. But the crisis was imminent, so I shoved her somewhere new, and it must have been reverse because the car went rapidly out of the garden backwards, across the road, and into a fence on the opposite side. Ted was yelling something about "Brake," but I was quite incapable of obeying any orders. I could only wait for the *dénouement*, whatever it might be.

I had not even time to offer up my special little prayer.

As mercy would have it, the fence stopped the car. Ted jumped up, pushed himself into my seat, and a second later we were off down the road at a speed which I am quite sure should never be attempted outside Brooklands.

"The ole fool never took the number!" chuckled Ted, and he went on laughing for quite a couple of miles. I never knew such a dare-devil!

The other untoward incident was somewhat similar, but more dangerous.

I do not wish to harp on it. I shall describe it bluntly, just as it happened.

We were going along quite nicely, about eight miles an hour, on a main road. I was driving, and had wormed my way through that nasty little "gate" until at last I was in the very top gear of all.

"Take the first to your left," said Ted.

I did so. A hill (up) faced us.

"When you feel 'er slowing, slip down into second," said Ted.

"She's slowing now."

"Well, slip into second! Go on! Quick!"

It was his saying "quick" that did it. I was flurried. I admit it. No instructor should ever say "quick" to a person driving for the first time.

I pushed out the clutch, fumbled with the gear lever, let the clutch in again, and accelerated. A dense smoke arose, through which we proceeded *down the hill, backwards!*

I realised that we were going backwards, that the main road was not far off, and beyond that a

canal. If nothing in the way of traffic struck us we should enter the canal.

I remember thinking that I should never be married after all, and wondering whether Muriel would wear mourning, and how she would look in it.

All this time, of course, Ted was bellowing instructions like a madman. I think I heard the words "brake," and "'celerator," and "foot" (or "fool"), and "traction engine." I could, however, do nothing. It was a nightmare realised.

But Ted did something. He wrenched my foot off the accelerator, leaned across me very roughly, and jammed on the side-brake.

We stopped. A hoarse cry in duplicate came from the main road. . . .

I learned later that the traction-engine had carried away our tail-lamp. . . . You can't have it much closer than that.

Ted drove all the way home. To-morrow, he says, I shall go out with 'Arry. 'Arry has a jealous nature, it seems, and Ted does not wish to rouse it.

CHAPTER V

ALONE WITH THE FLICK

JUNE 19.—I am not very well to-day. I don't think it's anything organic, but it may be.

Mrs. Gadden, my landlady, is pessimistic on the subject. She says her mother looked just like me for years before she was carried off. At the end, it seems, she went suddenly. Mrs. Gadden is quite prepared for my going suddenly. She brought me up some bread-and-milk and laid the bill on the tray alongside. Rather delicate, I thought.

My own opinion is that I am suffering from nervous prostration. I was never very strong as a child, and it is just a question whether I ought not to relinquish motoring and retire to a home. I think I would but for Muriel. You can't very well expect a perfectly healthy young wife to live with you in a home.

Perhaps if I write about my sufferings of yesterday it may do me some good. I was not in the least expecting that to happen which did happen. I simply went along to the garage in the usual way for my lesson. I was feeling quite cheerful—almost robust. The fresh air and the new interest in life were doing me good. I was smoking a cigarette and whistling. Not at one and the same time, of course, but alternately.

"Feelin' pretty fit?" said Ted.

"Magnificent," I replied. A rash answer!

"Glad to 'ear it. I'm goin' ter send you out on yer own ternight."

I have often thought that novelists exaggerated when they said the heart of the hero stopped beating. They do not. I wronged them. It is quite possible for the heart to stop beating for a few moments. Mine did, for instance, when Ted made that remark.

My sensations as a whole, in fact, were most peculiar. Not only did I go all numb from head to foot, but I lost my sense of sight. Ted disappeared. The garage disappeared. The Flick disappeared. I found myself in a nebulous world with nothing but a voice to assure me that I still lived.

The voice, of course, was Ted's. It said:

"You gorn all pile. Wot's up?"

Gradually I came to life. Ted reappeared. Also the garage and the Flick. Especially the Flick. It stood there with its back all hunched up and a sinister smile on the bonnet. It was li! some foul reptilian monster pretending to sleep whilst waiting for its victim.

"Nothing," I said. "I had rather a tiring day in the City."

"A spin in the car is wot you want," said Ted.

He lied. A spin in the car, by myself, was the last thing I wanted. An arm-chair, and a locked door, and a nice milk-and-soda would have appealed to one enormously.

"Got yer drivin'-licence?" asked Ted.

I hoped I hadn't. My hand trembled so it took

me some time to get it into my pocket, but I found the licence.

" Good. I've warmed 'er up. In you pop."

" Just a moment," I delayed. " I fear there's something the matter with my inside."

" Yer inside ? " He grinned, the beast. " You looked jolly enough comin' up the road."

" Yes, I dare say I did, but I'm subject to these sudden spasms. I don't want to trouble you with unpleasant details, but I'm afraid my stomach has turned completely over."

" Wind up," was Ted's comment. " That'll pass off the moment you get going. I uster feel just that wye meself when I fust started drivin'."

" Did you ? " I cried eagerly.

" 'Course I did. But I soon got over it and so will you. 'Op in an' I'll start 'er up for yer."

" Oh, but hadn't I better start her myself? You see, she might stop on the road, and if I couldn't start her——"

" Right yew are. Set yer spark the wye I told yer. See as she's in nootral. Nah give the 'andle a sharp pull up an' don't get yer thumb rahnd it in case she back-fires and breaks yer blinkin' arm."

To tell the truth, I rather hoped she would. But no. My luck was dead out. She started at once.

" Now," advised Ted, as I took my seat in the car, " don't try and go too fast, and keep to the quiet roads. Stick yer 'and out right or left when you want to turn. And," he concluded under his breath, but my senses were so on the alert that I heard him distinctly, " Gawd sive the king."

I pushed out the clutch and went into the lowest

gear. I really meant to have one more word with Ted before actually starting, but unfortunately my foot slipped off the clutch and I darted off at a rapid rate.

"Steady! Go steady!" bawled Ted after me.

In order to comply with his injunctions I pushed down the foot-brake. The Flick stopped abruptly, and so did the engine. Ted came running up.

"Wot's the matter?" he shouted, rather angrily.

"You said something, did you not?"

"I on'y told you to go steady. You don't want to go off with a rush."

This was only a half-truth. I didn't want to go off at all.

"I'll start 'er for yer. Is she in nootral?"

She wasn't, but I soon put her there. Once again the poor creature gave her well-known scream, and once again I journeyed off, alone, into the cruel and heartless world.

In certain respects, however, I had the advantage of Society. I knew something which they did not. All they could see was a dashing young fellow in horn-rimmed spectacles driving a motor-car. I, for my part, knew that I had practically no knowledge of the internal working of the animal, and very little control of this powerful and death-dealing weapon. It was all very well for them to cross the road in front of me with an air of assurance. At any moment the Flick might leap forward and mow them into an unrecognisable mass.

Strange, the trustingness of the public! If only they realised that a highly nervous driver is quite incapable of doing the right thing in an emergency,

and that self-preservation is the first law of Nature ! In an ordinary way I am one of the most tender-hearted men in the world, but last week my feelings towards humanity seemed to be in abeyance. To put it shortly, if they got in my way they were done !

I decided on a rather clever precaution. Now that Ted, the slave-driver, was no longer with me, why should I not remain in the lowest and slowest gear ? We are all urged to seek safety first. By keeping in the lowest gear I could limit my speed to four miles an hour—a walking pace ! Not much faster than an ordinary pram !

I did this. The engine made a good deal of noise, of course, but what did that matter so long as I had the car under complete control ? It was rather pleasant, when one became used to it, to proceed at four miles an hour. One could sit back and think. One could even, very furtively, admire the passing view. Doubtless I should consume a great quantity of petrol, but that was the affair of the garage. The price of the lesson included petrol.

On we went. I was really beginning to enjoy the ride when a number of small boys became attracted by my slow progress, and decided to keep pace with me. One planted himself in front with a dirty handkerchief tied to a stick. The others marched right and left, and sang some vulgar song of the moment in such shrill tones that they could be heard above the noise of the engine. People on the pavement stopped and laughed as we went by.

This would never do. Suppose I met Muriel ? Or her father ? Or some member of the family ?

I must change up and put on speed. The first thing, however, was to sound a note of warning.

It was a good note that I sounded. The small boy in front leapt high into the air and might have been under the car but for his great agility.

"Look up!" yelled the rest of the troop. "'E's a-goin' ter scorch!"

I declutched, and pulled the lever into neutral. All I had to do now was to slip into second and accelerate. I knew perfectly well what to do. I had done it a hundred times under Ted's tuition.

Strange as it may seem, I could not get that lever to go into the right notch. The most piteous screams came from the gears. The car got slower and slower. To prevent her stopping altogether I returned, hastily, to the low gear. On we went as before.

"'E's chynged 'is mind!" yelled a lad, and another, with unparalleled audacity, actually climbed on to the running-board.

"Get down," I said, sternly.

"Give us a ride, guvnor!" he pleaded.

"Get down at once! I shall call a policeman!"

"Tike the whip to 'im!" advised a friend.

Another urchin mounted the car on the other side. There was no help for it. I must stop and expostulate in severe terms.

"Now, look here," I said, when we had come to a standstill, "you boys are running a very grave risk. At any moment I might drive away at a great pace, and where would you be then?"

"'Avin' a good ride!" was the hilarious answer.

"No, you would not be having a good ride. You would be lying on your backs in the roadway, and

very likely some other car would come along and run over you. That's what happens to small boys who don't behave themselves. So run away and play at soldiers, or something, and don't annoy me any more ! "

" 'E's goin' ter cry ! " suggested the youth with the flag.

He was nearer the truth than he thought. My engine had stopped, and I was not at all sure if I could remember the various processes necessary for getting it to go again. Placing the lever in neutral, I was about to step out when the Flick began to move of her own volition. We were evidently on a slight incline.

Returning hurriedly to my seat, I clapped on the side-brake. I then descended, and all the boys stood round whilst I turned the starting-handle. Presently she started up and the engine began to race. I made a dart for the driving-seat, scattering urchins as I went, and moderated the pace of the engine with the little lever on the steering-wheel. All that was very good and professional. The small boys, I think, were impressed.

I then declutched, went into my low gear, and accelerated. The engine, to my surprise, stopped ! Strange ! What could be the matter ? Again I descended and repeated the whole performance. No sooner, however, did I attempt to start the car than the engine stopped.

I began to get hot. There were quite a lot of people all round us by this time. I remember a nursemaid with a child who particularly annoyed me. The child was peevish, and she kept adjuring it to look at the clever gentleman. Every time she

said it the crowd laughed, and you know how girls of that class like to pose as wits !

I thought I had better open the bonnet and pretend to examine the engine. I have often seen drivers do that when in a difficulty, and admired their technical knowledge.

The catches of the bonnet gave me a good deal of trouble, but the lid flew up at last and tore the skin off my knuckles. I licked off the oil and spat in the roadway. That seemed the manly thing to do.

" 'E's drinkin' 'is blood," observed an urchin, which went well with his sycophantic friends.

They crowded round the engine and seemed to delight in the smell of the hot oil. If Muriel and I ever have a child, I sincerely hope it will be a little girl.

Now that the lid was open I was naturally at a loss what to do. I felt that I ought to touch something, but what ? There was such a choice ! And what if I touched the wrong thing and something happened ?

" Is it all there, guvnor ? " asked a blue-eyed little lad innocently.

" Yes, my boy," I replied.

" Which is the carberettor, guvnor ? "

" Don't you know ? " I retorted, with forced jocularly. I hadn't an idea myself.

" No, guvnor. Which is it, please ? "

" Why, that," I said, and laid my fingers carelessly on a complicated part of the engine. The next moment I had sprung backwards with a yell that must have startled the neighbourhood. The moment I touched the engine an extraordinary sensation had fastened on my hand and arm, as

though some deadly snake had bitten me. I suppose it was an electric shock. At any rate, I sent two urchins flying, and the remainder flung themselves about in a state of uncontrolled glee.

A young fellow now detached himself from the crowd and came forward.

" Trouble ? " he asked, laconically.

" She won't start," I explained.

" What won't ? You've got yer engine running."

" Yes, I know, but the moment I put her into gear the engine stops."

" Let's have a look. Stand back, you boys."

The boys, instinctively recognising the tone of the expert, stood back.

The young fellow peered into the engine for a few moments, and then did something quickly which stopped it running.

" Got yer tool-kit ? " he asked abruptly.

" I—er—I'm not quite sure."

" Well, 'ave a look. Where d'yer keep it ? "

" Oh, in the tool-shed, you know."

" I'm talking about tools for the car."

" Quite."

He stared at me rather hard, and then rummaged about until he found some tools. I lit a cigarette and scowled at the sunset. It's always well to carry off a difficult situation with an air.

The young man undid something with a rube to it and told me to turn the starting-handle very slowly. I obeyed, rather unwillingly. A proud nature, I am not accustomed to taking orders from strangers.

" Whoa ! " he shouted. " She's sparking all right."

" Yes, I thought she was," I answered.

He closed the bonnet on that side, opened the other side, and had another good look at the Flick's entrails. By this time about a hundred people had collected, including a policeman, who made a lovely ring round us. I doubted if I had ever been so conspicuous since my baptism.

"Try 'er now," ordered the young fellow.

I got in the car and he started the engine. Into gear I went, accelerated, and—the engine stopped.

The expert scratched his head. "Funny," he muttered, and stooped once more over the engine. I admire doggedness, and he was dogged. He undid nearly everything that would undo, and made sparks and bangs that sent the small boys into a dream of envy. The sun sank lower in the west. I began to want my supper.

"Try 'er once more. Give her plenty of juice! Now!"

Same result.

"I suppose," he said, grimy and sweating, "you haven't by any chance got your side-brake on?"

"Oh, yes," I assured him. "It's well on"

There was a roar from the crowd, in which the expert did not join. Poor fellow, he had done his best, but he really should have thought, being an expert, of the side-brake. I don't for one moment pretend to be an expert, but it was I, after all, who started the engine for the last time and drove off. The funny thing was I quite forgot to be nervous. I drove off in the most natural manner, turned a couple of corners, and was soon back at the garage. I had travelled in all, I suppose, about half a mile.

The garage was locked up, but 'Arry lived near by and I managed to rout him out.

" We thought you was dead," was his welcome.

" Oh, no. Went a little farther than I expected, that's all."

" 'Ave any trouble ? "

" Not much. She sparked very well, considering."

" Considerin' wot ? "

" Well, considering the pace at which I travelled."

We pushed her into the garage and then 'Arry looked her over.

" She's 'ot," he observed. " You must 'ave bin a-goin' it."

" Pretty fair, thanks."

" 'Ullo ! Where's yer tool-kit ? "

" Tool-kit ? "

" Ah. You 'ad the full set when you went out. There's no tools 'ere nah."

It was true. I remembered a certain shouting as I drove off after the scene in the road, but attributed it to impertinence and took no notice. Clearly, at this juncture, the shouting was well meant. I had left all the tools in the road.

" They must have been stolen when I stopped for a drink," I explained.

" Tools is tools these days," said 'Arry.

CHAPTER VI

MY FIRST PASSENGER

JUNE 23.—I have no hesitation in saying that this has been, up to date, the proudest day of my life.

I arranged it all with the greatest care. I wrote to Muriel, and told her to be certain of being at home about six-thirty, when she would have a very great surprise. Curiosity is a tremendous lever with the female sex, and I felt sure she would be there all right.

I then instructed Ted to have the Flick looking her very best by six-fifteen at latest. (I was getting quite a confident driver by this time. I had been out three times all by myself, and covered a distance of not less than nine miles in all; I am not pretending that I am even yet an expert, and the inside is still a complete mystery, but I can keep a fairly straight course on an empty road, and on one occasion I passed a coal-cart. I ought to say that I had been behind it for nearly a mile, and I seemed to be getting on the carter's nerves.

I dressed myself for this evening's event with very great care. A young fellow I know in the office was in the Air Force during the war, and had a leather coat and cap to match. He offered

to sell me the two for three pounds. They were not much to look at, being covered with oil, but he said they were all the better for that, being much more dashing. (It is rather curious the way the word "dashing" crops up at our office when I am anywhere about. I do hope they are not unkindly disposed.)

After consideration, I said the leather cap would not look well with spectacles, but I would buy the coat. He said I must take the two or nothing, so I took the two. After all, I was not obliged to wear the leather cap. I compromised with my best straw, neatly illuminated by the colours of the C.E.S. (Camberwell Entomological Society).

Clad in the leather coat and the straw hat, therefore, I left the garage at a round eight miles an hour and made for Mr. Levendale's house. This was the very scene that I had rehearsed, you may remember, with Lindsay Mountford. I was excited, I can tell you, because dear little Muriel knew nothing, nothing whatever, mark you, of the Flick. It was an event, not to exaggerate, which might well affect the whole of her future life.

There is a sweep up to the house, and a somewhat narrow gateway. The gate, as a rule, stands open, and I had reckoned on that. It is so much more dashing to drive right in than to stop, and get down, and open the gate, and climb back into the car, and all that.

As I approached, I could see dear Muriel leaning out of an upper window. She did not know who it was, of course, but she would in a minute. Once through the gateway and the rest——

And now a very curious and unexpected thing happened. I ought to tell you that Mount Pleasant is a row of rather large and important houses, each standing in its own grounds, and each having its own carriage-sweep. All these houses have names, of course, and not vulgar numbers. Mr. Levendale's house, for example, is called "Guildestern," a name taken from Shakespeare, and the one next door is "Rosencrantz." The Levendales, I regret to say; are not on very good terms with the Isaacsteins, who live at "Rosencrantz." In point of fact, the families have not exchanged a single word for years.

Well, as soon as I saw my dear Muriel leaning from the upper window, I pulled my wheel round smartly and made a dash for the gateway. To my surprise there was a nasty grating noise and something jarred me all up and down my spine. Then the Flick came to a halt, and I found, to my dismay, that my right mudguard was wedged underneath one of the bars of the gate.

This was a very great pity, because it quite spoilt the effect I had intended to create. But worse was to follow. The crash aroused a large dog which had been sleeping on the doorstep. It immediately bounded up, barking ferociously, and dashed at the car! I presumed it belonged to a visitor, for I knew the Levendales had no dog of that kind.

"Good old fellow!" I said soothingly. "Lie down, boy! Lie down!"

He did nothing of the sort. On the contrary, he assumed a most menacing attitude, and the barking noise was really dreadful. I tried to back

the car, but it was firmly stuck in the gate. So I bethought me of my horn, and gave several resounding hoots, hoping it might frighten off the dog. So far from this being the case, it seemed to infuriate him even more.

A babel of this kind could not go on for very long without attracting attention in this quiet and select road. And it did not. Windows were thrown up, and a stout, elderly gentleman, who was not Mr. Levendale, came hurriedly out of the house without a hat, and approached me, shaking his fist.

"What are you doing there?" he shouted. "Get out of it!"

I rose in my seat, as usual, and, also as usual, raised my straw hat.

"Sir," I said, "if this dog belongs to you, will you kindly call it off? I will then explain the situation."

"No, sir!" he retorted, with great brutality, "I will not call it off! The dog is doing his duty! Go it, Drummond, old boy! Fetch him out!"

This was nothing short of criminal. The dog's eyes were nearly starting from his head. I realised that I had merely to exhibit one sign of fear and he would spring at my throat.

Stooping, I pressed the horn, which startled the gentleman, but had no effect whatever on the dog except to fleck his mouth with foam. Taking advantage of the gentleman's momentary breathlessness, I again raised my hat and said:

"I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance, but I am a friend of Mr. Levendale, the owner of this house."

The effect of this remark was astonishing in the extreme. The gentleman's eyes protruded from his head almost as much as Drummond's. He then came quite close to the car, and spoke in a voice that was hoarse with fury.

"Levendale! The owner of this house! Indeed! Since when? I, sir, am the owner of this house, and have been for the last twenty years!"

Horrors! In a flash I realised it all! I was not wedged in the gate of the father of my adored, but in that of the enemy next door! I had mistaken the entrance in my excitement, and this maniac on the path was Mr. Isaacstein! As for the girl I had seen at the upper window, it was not my dear Muriel at all, but one of the Miss Isaacsteins, whom Muriel loathed with all the force of her beautiful nature.

There was nothing for it but to raise my hat a third time. I was still standing, mark you, to keep my throat as far as possible from dear old Drummond.

"Sir," I said courteously, "I beg your pardon. I have made a mistake."

"You have," retorted Mr. Isaacstein, still unappeased. "Get out of it, or I won't answer for what my dog may do!"

"I would retire with pleasure," I explained, "but it so happens that the mud-guard of my car is caught under a bar of your gate. If you would kindly remove the gate from the hinges——"

Over he boiled again. I fear his life will terminate suddenly some day if he is not careful.

"What's that? Take my gate off its hinges to oblige an ass like you? I can see myself doing it!"

" I wish I could," I said appeasingly.

" I'll tell you what it is, young man. If I send for the police, you'll pay dearly for this ! A fine for trespass, a fine for the damage to my gate, and your licence endorsed ! As for your car, you'd better put it back in the Ark, where you presumably got it from ! "

This cowardly attack on the Flick annoyed me. At all costs, the conversation must cease. Besides, a good many servant-maids were thrusting their white-capped heads out of windows and giggling in the most unnecessary way.

The engine was still running. I sat down, braving Drummond, forced the lever into the reverse notch, accelerated, and simply flew backwards and fetched up against a lamp-post with such a force that I was almost jerked from my seat over the tail-lamp. At that precise moment, dear Muriel came walking up the road, looking as pretty as a picture !

She stopped on seeing the impact, and clasped her hands. Then, as the accident appeared to be concluded, she came forward.

" I hope you are not hurt," she said politely, not recognising me in the unaccustomed garb.

" Not at all," said I, turning with a smile and raising my hat.

" Leonard ! " she cried. " What in the world are you doing in that car ? "

" Sitting in it," said I, enjoying her surprise.

" But you came backwards, at a great pace, out of the Isaacsteins' drive ! "

" That is so ! I was not well received by Mr. Isaacstein—or Drummond."

"But—I don't understand! Why did you go there? And in a car? You *are* Leonard Rabbidge, aren't you?"

"At your service, Miss Levendale. I called on Mr. Isaacstein by mistake. I called in a car because this is my car—or will be very shortly, if you approve of it."

"*Your* car? *Your own*? Have you *bought* it?"

"I am about to do so, subject to your approval. I thought it would come in handy for our honeymoon."

"*Well!*" breathed Muriel.

She was winded. That alone was worth the money, for Muriel, let me tell you, is not often winded. She could only stare, and walk round the Flick, looking at it from all points.

"Do you like it?" I asked casually.

"It's a duck," declared Muriel. And she hopped, just as she was, into the seat by my side. We were still, I might mention, well up against the lamp-post.

"Comfy?"

"Lovely!" She wriggled with joy. "Is it really your very own?"

"It will be when I've paid for it."

"How much?"

"Ah! That's telling!"

"Leonard! You're not ruining yourself over this car, are you?"

"I hope not."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. We'll have a lovely tour. Where shall we go?"

"I thought of Devon and Cornwall."

"How too heavenly! We won't ever come back!"

"Don't say that!"

"Well, you know what I mean. How do we go?"

"From here to Maidenhead. Maidenhead to Reading. Reading to Bath. Bath to Bristol. Bristol to Barnstaple. Barnstaple to Land's End."

"Land's End. I've always longed to go to Land's End! I must have a leather coat, like yours, and you can get the most ducky little furlined leather hats at Barker's! Oh, won't it be too divine!"

"'Ere!" said a gruff voice from the path behind us. "Wot's all this mean?"

We turned quickly, and saw a large policeman, who had come up whilst we were engrossed in our conversation.

I raised my hat. It was instinct.

"Good evening, constable," I said. "Am I in the way?"

"Well, I dunno about being in the way, but your car ain't doing this lamp-post no good. 'Ad an accident?"

"Hardly an accident, constable. I came rather rapidly out of the opposite drive, and the lamp-post just saved me from a nasty collision with the wall."

"Well," repeated the constable, "you can't sit there all night and talk about it."

"You're quite right," I conceded. "It would be most improper for me to sit here all night with this young lady, although, as a matter of fact,

we are shortly to be married, and propose to spend our honeymoon in motoring from here to Land's End."

"And very nice, too!" rejoined the officer, politely touching his helmet to Muriel, who blushed sweetly and bowed in the most dignified way.

"You think so?" I cried.

"Not 'arf," said the constable.

"You approve of Land's End?"

"Oh, I never said anything about Land's End."

Whereupon he laughed, and Muriel laughed, and I laughed, so we were all laughing together, you see, which was very jolly and friendly indeed.

Quite suddenly the constable, who was an abrupt fellow, became once again serious and official.

"Before going any further," he said, "we must 'ave this car back on the road."

"Quite," I agreed. "Indeed, constable, it would be hardly possible to proceed further in the opposite direction."

"Can you drive 'er out of the gutter, or 'ad we better shove 'er?"

"Let's shove 'er," I suggested happily. If there's one thing I can do in the matter of motor-cars with ease and certainty, it is to push them hither and thither with the human hand.

Muriel and I hopped out, therefore, and the constable took charge of the situation.

"Now," he said, "you shove on one side and I'll shove t'other. As soon as she begins to move I'll slip my back up against the lamp-post, and that'll give me a bit of purchase, see?"

"Quite. Most excellently thought out."

" Are you ready ? Shove up ! "

I pushed very hard, the constable did the same, and the Flick moved about six to twelve inches forward. Well, I couldn't be sure of the exact distance she moved, but it must have been the thickness of a policeman because the constable managed to insert himself between the back of the car and the lamp-post. A noble and heroic thing to do, but not very judicious, as it turned out, because my foot happened to slip at this juncture, and the Flick receded somewhat, securing the constable between the hood and the lamp-post !

" Oy ! " he shouted. " Oy ! You got me pinned ! "

" Dear, dear ! " said I. " I wonder what is the next step ? "

" The man will be squashed flat ! " exclaimed Muriel, clasping her hands in the most charming manner.

" That is so, " I agreed. " In point of fact, he is already turning black. Whatever happens, however, we must keep our heads. "

The constable, fortunately, could not speak.

" Why don't you get in and drive the car forward ? " urged Muriel.

" That is all very well, my darling, but what if it went backwards ? You never know with cars. At least, I never do. If anything like that happened he would die a most terribly painful death. As it is, he is comparatively safe. His chest is evidently a very fine one, and is withstanding the impact splendidly. "

" I know ! " cried dear Muriel. " We must blow

his whistle ! Then some more policemen will come to his aid ! ”

“ An excellent notion ! But where does he keep it ? ”

“ Ask him ! ”

“ Certainly. My poor fellow, could you indicate to me where you keep your whistle in normal times ? ”

He moved his head very slightly to the right. Rapid as thought, I dived my hand into his trouser-pocket, and drew out the contents. Three-and-fourpence in cash, half a smoked cigar slightly mud-stained, a box of matches, a pocket-knife with cork-screw and implement for removing stones from horses' feet (I never saw one of those implements actually used, by the way), and a plain gold ring, doubtless the dear fellow's wedding-ring which he removed before going on duty. You seldom see policemen wearing rings, do you ?

“ Well ? ” demanded Muriel. “ Is it there ? ”

“ There are many objects of great interest here but no whistle,” I broke it to her.

“ I'll fetch Daddy ! ”

Quick as lightning, she was across the road and had disappeared within the precincts of “ Guildenstern.” Being alone with the constable, I tried to take his mind off the situation with a little light chat.

“ She has gone to fetch Mr. Levendale,” I said. “ You may know the gentleman by sight—rather florid and portly. Yes ? Don't try to speak. Just nod if you wish to reply in the affirmative. Mr. Levendale is a man of considerable means, and well thought of in the City of London. I consider myself fortunate to be affianced to his daughter,

Miss Muriel Levendale. I gather from the existence of this ring that you yourself are married, constable? Is that the case? No nodding? Never mind. You mustn't think you look undignified, you know, because you don't. In a way, you look wonderfully imposing—like Atlas! Have you ever thought——?"

At this juncture, however, Mr. Levendale came hurrying from his house, followed by Muriel and the gardener and one or two other members of the staff. It was not quite the introduction to the Flick I had intended, but dramatic, say what you like.

"What the devil is all this?" shouted Mr. Levendale, half-way across the road.

"A motor, sir," I rejoined, raising my hat, "together with a constable and a lamp-post."

"Is the man dead?"

"Not yet, sir. As a matter of fact, I should say there's still a lot of life in the old dog."

"But what are you thinking of—ambling about and doing nothing?"

"I am keeping my head, sir. The car cannot retreat farther. There is nothing to be gained by hysteria."

"Shove, you fool!" said Mr. Levendale coarsely.

So we all shoved, and the constable was presently released. The moment he was extricated, the Flick crashed again into the lamp-post, and this time the frame of the hood was smashed, which caused me annoyance.

I will draw a veil over the next half-hour, merely chronicling the facts that the constable was escorted into "Guildenstern," where he consumed more

expensive brandy than I should have thought possible in cases of even extreme illness. Nothing was broken—except the frame of my hood—and he presently returned to his beat a richer and less sober man. The car, in the meantime, had been drawn by willing helpers into the drive of “Guildenstern.”

“And now,” said Mr. Levendale, fixing on me one of those nasty glances that the newspaper serials call baleful, “perhaps you will kindly tell me what that thing is outside my front-door, how it come to be there, and how long it is likely to remain there?”

“Very willingly, sir. Let us take your queries *seriatim*. One—what is it? It is a motor-car called the Flick, purchased by me as a pleasant surprise for your charming daughter. Two—shoved by the gardener, his boy, myself, and two loafers. Three—until Muriel is ready to come with me for a little drive.”

“I won’t be two ticks!” cried my beautiful.

“Stop!” commanded Mr. Levendale. “Are you an efficient driver?”

“I have a licence, sir.”

“I dare say. Any fool can get a licence. How far have you driven?”

“Some miles, sir.” (Ten, to be precise.)

“Have you run over anybody or anything?”

“Oh, no, sir.”

“Are you reckless? Do you drive fast?”

“That depends, sir. If I am alone, I dash along at a great speed. If with a passenger, I think of the sacred life entrusted to my care, and drive with caution.”

“Very well. Before you take my daughter out,

I consider it my duty to put your efficiency to a personal test. I shall therefore accompany you myself. Wait."

He disappeared. "Has he gone to ring up the police?" I whispered to dear Muriel.

"No, duffer! To dress up."

"What as?"

"As a motorist, I presume. And do be careful, Leonard, or we may never fly along together after all!"

This thought was so distressing that we had to embrace a little. We had not quite finished when a stern voice behind me called, "Now, sir!"

Turning, I beheld Mr. Levendale. He was wearing an enormous cloth cap, goggles, a fur coat with a deep collar, and a thick pair of woollen gloves. In a word, he was prepared for speed.

I bade him take his seat in the car, and began to start the engine. Out of the corner of my eye I could see dear Muriel watching me with profound admiration. The engine had got a little cold, but in less than twenty minutes she fired up, and we drew slowly out of the drive into the open road.

"Where are we going?" bellowed Mr. Levendale.

"Oh, anywhere you like," I said easily. "The City?"

"No, no! Keep to the open country."

"Very good, sir."

"What pace are we doing now?"

"Oh, about twenty-five. Would you like to go faster?"

"Certainly not! I disapprove of fast driving. You can't drive too slowly for me. Mind that cart in front!"

" Shall I keep behind it ? "

" It might be better."

As this was a coal-cart going about three miles an hour, we were some little time reaching the end of the road. Here I forked left, and found myself in a lane that grew narrower and narrower. I began to suspect it of being a blind alley, but prayed for otherwise, since there was no room to turn. Not for me, at any rate. To add to our discomfort, the surface grew worse and worse, so that the springs of the Flick began to betray their lack of resiliency.

" Where are we going ? " asked Mr. Levendale, in a voice that sounded as though he were shivering.

" Just a little round," I answered in a similar voice.

" Do you know where you are ? "

" Yes, I'm almost sure I do."

" Dammit, sir, you ought to be quite sure ! "

This nettled me considerably. I may not have mentioned it before, but I cannot bear to be sworn at. So, to vent my resentment, I pressed the accelerator and we bounded—bounded is the word—forward.

A moment later I heard an inarticulate noise on my left. Turning, I perceived my father-in-law-to-be making strange signals. With one hand he was vigorously indicating his mouth, and with the other pointing over his shoulder the way we had come.

I divined at once what he meant. He wanted a drink. He had lost his nerve, and was urging me to take him home so that he might restore himself with alcohol. This was all very well, but we had

come about a mile down the lane; and I could never trust myself to travel all that distance backwards. So I just nodded, and held on.

Again that strange noise, and again he pointed to his mouth. Really, this was almost indecent! Any man may be thirsty; I myself have at times been only too glad of a cup of water or a nice lemonade; but to keep shouting out, and pointing to his mouth when we had not left the house more than twenty minutes, did seem disgusting.

So I held on.

Now the old gentleman grew violent. He actually struck me on the arm!

This was too much. They say you must begin as you mean to go on, and I could not possibly allow my father-in-law to get into the habit of striking me! I therefore stopped, and proceeded to put the matter in a clear light.

" Mr. Levendale," I began, raising my hat, " I do not wish that there should be between us any bad blood. But if you persist——"

And then what do you think? He got out of the car! Yes, he got out of the car, and started to walk back in the direction we had come!

" Oh, sir!" I called. " Really, sir! Really!"

Turning without stopping, he again pointed to his mouth. Was the man a dipsomaniac? This was a terrible thought, because he might have handed on the awful curse to my dear Muriel! The craving must have come upon him very suddenly! And how carefully he and the family had concealed it!

I decided to reverse and crawl backwards out of the lane. This took time, as I dared not travel

above one mile an hour, and, half-way along, the petrol ran out, and had to be replenished from my spare tin. When I reached the main road, therefore, Mr. Levendale had entirely disappeared. I imagined him running as fast as he could to "Guildenstern," muttering to himself all the way, "Whisky!" "Brandy!" "Gin!" "Beer!" "Port!" No doubt he had them all secretly stored in his cellar.

When I eventually reached "Guildenstern," he was waiting for me on the steps.

"Well!" he broke out as I applied the brake. "You're a nice sort of fellow! Why didn't you stop when I asked you?"

"Because, sir," I said soothingly, "I thought we should come to one a little farther on."

"Come to one! Come to one what?"

"Public-house, sir."

"*Public-house*? Is the man mad? Who said anything about a public-house?"

"You kept pointing to your mouth, sir, and I thought you were seized with a desire for drink."

"Oh, you did, did you? Well, sir, let me tell you that that infernal car of yours jolted me to such an extent that my *teeth* fell out!"

So that was it! And he was not, after all, a dipsomaniac! My relief was so great that tears sprang to my eyes.

"Oh, Daddy, you've made Leonard cry!" exclaimed my sweet Muriel, and she leapt into the car, as women will, and flung her arms about my neck. "Don't listen to what they say!" she murmured. "It's a booful-booful car, and I'm

going to call it ' The Fast Lady ' ! Isn't that a lovely name ? "

" Lovely ! " I agreed. " Most appropriate ! "

And so to bed at the end of this wonderful day. After all, what do Mr. Levendale and the policeman matter ? *Amor omnia exit !*

CHAPTER VII

O DAY OF DAYS !

JULY 10.—I am married. . . .
Am I married ? . . .

Yes. I *am* married. I was married to-day. I am married to my dear Muriel !

Here is a solemn and astounding thought. In the quiet of this beautiful hotel room, so simply yet tastefully furnished, with just two black-and-gold vases on the mantelpiece, and a warning on the wall that if I don't vacate by noon to-morrow I shall have to pay for another night—in this impressive room, I say, I must try to recollect all that has to-day happened.

A stupendous task ! To set down all the impressions of the greatest day, I suppose, in my life !

I am alone. This is a "suite," and dear Muriel is in the next room. Poor child ! Torn from her home, wrested from the stout arms of her mother and the somewhat conventional pats of the back of her father, by a ruthless MAN ! How many bridegrooms, I wonder, realise the enormity of their assurance ? For the rest of her life, this sweet, innocent girl will bear my name and share my fortunes ! Where I go, she will go ! If we are ever parted, even for twenty-four hours, she will be thinking of me !

"Mizpah!" It is engraved upon the ring that she gave me with her own fair hands! Solid gold, mind you. I hope her father paid for it, but perhaps that is a sordid thought, and this day of days must not be marred by sordid thoughts. I keep on trying to forget what they are charging me for this suite of rooms, with bath.

Why so luxurious? Because we are in London! Yes, our honeymoon has started in London, of all places! The Flick, otherwise known as the "Fast Lady," which seems to control our destinies in the most remarkable manner, is responsible for that as well.

To hark back. I woke at six. Well, if it comes to that, I was awake nearly all night. I kept wondering whether I had made a mistake—whether I ought not to draw back before it was too late. What if our temperaments proved incompatible? I tried not to think of the Divorce Court, and yet, in a way, it was a cosy thought. O felon groom!

Then I remembered all the presents and the guests. There were to be quite two hundred people to see me married—*me*! Well, not me, perhaps, but Muriel, and she could not marry without me.

I lay and—shivered.

At eight or thereabouts Lindsay Mountford burst into the room. He said it was a glorious morning, and I must come for a swim! Swim, indeed! I had hardly the strength to shave, let alone swim!

"What's the matter?" he asked brutally. "You look rotten!"

"My dear Lindsay," I retorted, "have you ever been married?"

His reply was flippant. I shall not write it down

Why did I invite him to be my "best man"? The Flick again. I thought it would be useful to have an expert on the spot when we started. I never dreamed that he would kiss my beautiful one so vociferously in the vestry.

"When you are," I said, "if you ever are, you will feel on the morning of your wedding exactly like a man who is going to be hanged."

"That's not very complimentary to the girl," commented Lindsay.

"Oh, yes, it is. When a man is to be hanged at eight o'clock he knows he will be in heaven about five minutes past. Does that make him any jollier? No, Lindsay. You may be well versed in motor-cars, but you know nothing at all about being married. It is a solemn plunge."

"Right O! I'm going for an unsolemn plunge! See you later!" And off the flippant fellow dashed.

I dressed myself. Like the girl in a song I once heard, I don't know how I did it, but I did. A lot of buttons got done up the wrong way, and a good many came right off, so Mrs. Gadden was kept busy. Dear Mrs. Gadden! How sympathetic she was! My garments kept on coming back to me stained with her tears. Luckily, tear-stains leave no mark.

When Lindsay returned I was dressed. I even had on my top-hat and gloves. I was sitting on the edge of a chair and keeping quite, quite still.

"Hallo!" he said. "Going out?"

"I am going to be married," I replied icily.

"But, my dear old bean, that's not till two-thirty! And it's only just ten!"

"All my life," I replied, "I have been a punctual man. Is there any reason why I should be unpunctual at my wedding? Besides, I have a presentiment that something will happen to prevent my reaching the church."

"Rot! Don't you bank on that! I'll see you get there all right."

"Even you, my dear Lindsay, cannot interfere with destiny. If it is destined that I am never to marry Muriel——" Here I paused. It was too moving for words. I buried my face in my gloved hands, and had it not been a size too small—which I kept on telling the silly man in the shop—my hat would have fallen off.

"That's a topping good trick," said Lindsay.

"I don't understand you," I mumbled.

"Why, being able to put your head right down without your hat falling off. Have a sausage?"

I went straight out into the air. The street being impossible, dressed like that, I went into Mrs. Gadden's back garden, and all the hens came and stood round me, expecting to be fed. A trusting sight! I had nothing to give them for a last meal, and turned away in a new agony.

I had ordered a taxi to drive me to the church. Lindsay wanted me to dash up in the "Fast Lady," but I refused.

"That would cause an anti-climax," I pointed out. "I intend to dash away from the door of 'Guildenstern' in the 'Fast Lady.' Let it be kept in the background till then. Ted has promised to have her all tuned up, whatever that may mean, and replete with oil and petrol. A touch, and off we go! If I drive to the church in her, I must

drive Muriel from the church to 'Guildenstern' in her, and so you see!"

"Well, what are you going to do till two-fifteen?"

"My dear fellow, read the marriage service, of course."

"I think a game of pills at the 'Blue Goat' would do you more good in your present frame of mind."

"My dear Lindsay, I have never been inside the 'Blue Goat' in my life, and if you imagine that I would so pollute myself on my wedding-morn you are a very bad judge of character. Go there yourself, if you wish it, but I hope you won't reek of alcohol, sawdust and chalk when you stand behind me at the altar-steps, because people may think it's me."

He went off, but was back in good time for lunch, of which I personally did not partake. Indeed, no solid food had passed my lips for twenty-four hours, and I was married fasting. And not the first fasting bridegroom, I am prepared to wager a small sum.

I cannot describe my sensations when we arrived at the church for the simple reason that I had none. I was quite numb, and yet numb is hardly the precise word. It is not strong enough. I have read of people moving as though in a dream, but even that eloquent description is not wholly sufficient. I was like a completely numbed man in a dense fog.

The church was there, and the people were there, yet I discerned them but dimly. Lindsay really was splendid at this point. But for him I doubt if I should have been married at all. I think it

quite likely that I should have abandoned the wild project at the church door. But Lindsay gripped me by the elbow and marched me up the aisle to the very top. There was no escape after that.

Muriel arrived a year later. I mean, that it seemed a full year, standing there in front of all those people and waiting. Never before in my life have I been so conspicuous, and I fervently trust never to be so again. It is cruel of brides always to be late.

Yet it was even worse when at last she did arrive. Anything more lovely I don't suppose had ever been seen in that church or any other. I expect I gaped. You must remember that I had never seen her like that. So tall and white she looked ! No lily or swan would have had the faintest chance with her. As for me, an ordinary earth-worm could have jostled against me and pushed me over.

Then the actual ceremony started. Whilst the clergyman was reading the preliminary paragraphs, I suddenly heard a murmur that seemed familiar. I glanced sideways at Muriel. Yes ! Beneath her veil her lips were moving.

" What ? " I managed to whisper.

" Buck up ! " was her astonishing reply.

The courage of that girl ! I smiled at her as best I could to show that I was bucking up. It could not have been much of a smile because my lips were not under control. I dare say the result was a bit ghastly, but it showed willing, as they say.

I don't remember the part where I had to speak, despite my careful rehearsals in front of the glass. I must have said something because you can't get married unless you signify your assent in the usual

manner, but I confess that my mind is a blank on the point.

Lindsay, of course, had his own version of the incident. He declares that when the clergyman said to me, "Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?" I replied, "Yes, sir, thank you," and tried to raise an imaginary hat. This story made a hit at the reception afterwards, but, personally, I attach small credence to it. Lindsay is such a volatile rattle.

But I do remember the scene in the vestry. I was signing the register when I suddenly heard, just behind me, the sounds of kissing. Not gentle kissing, mind you, but very hearty kissing indeed. Turning anxiously, what should I behold but my wife in the arms of Mr. Lindsay Mountford!

"Well, really!" I ejaculated.

Lindsay was perfectly calm. "Best man's privilege, old bean," he said, and everybody laughed, including Muriel and the clergyman. I fear it is only too true that the morals of this country are on the swiftest possible down grade.

The next thing was that I drove Muriel back to "Guildenstern" in the taxi. We were alone together, man and wife.

"At last!" I said fervently, holding out my arms. I did that because, from what I have read, it is the correct procedure.

"Don't be an idiot," said Muriel. "And do you know that your hat is on back to front?"

After that we confined ourselves to common-places.

I was now beginning to get a little nervous about that dash off from the door. If the Flick refused

to start, there, indeed, would be a fiasco ! Or what if I crashed into the gatepost ! Whilst I stood by Muriel's side, shaking hands with the guests and saying charming little appropriate nothings, I was really wondering whether I should get Ted to drive her to the bottom of the road and make our start from round the corner. But, in that case, how should we leave the house ? Not walking. That was out of the question. Muriel, I felt, would never consent to that. Nor, when I came to think it out, had I ever heard of a bride and bridegroom starting away for the honeymoon on foot. There may be cases, but not within my knowledge.

Whilst the guests were drinking champagne and looking for their presents, which were numerous and costly (I hope), I slipped into the hall and found Ted. For a moment I hardly knew the honest fellow. I had never previously seen him without the all-in-one garment, yet here he stood in his Sunday suit, a bowler hat in hand, and a white favour in his buttonhole. The short portion of cigarette which usually depended from his upper lip was resting, in honour of the occasion, behind his ear.

Ted fumbled in his pocket and produced a small parcel.

" From me and 'Arry," he said simply.

I was deeply touched. The tears started to my eyes. I felt that in Ted I had a true friend. A wild and foolish desire seized me to invite him to accompany us on the tour. I managed, however, to conquer it. After all, the Flick was only a two-seater, and we should have had to drive away three

in a row. That would be even less like a honeymoon than walking off.

"Thank you, Ted," I said, "from the bottom of my heart."

"Just a few smokes," said Ted. "I got 'er outside."

"The Flick?"

"'Sright."

"Whereabouts?"

"Jest outside the front entrance."

"But what about all the other cars?" People—friends of the Levendales—had been rolling up in the most magnificent things I had ever seen.

"Oh, I cleared them out."

"You cleared them out, Ted?"

"Certingly I did. Yer the star turn in this bill, ain't yer? You goes fust. Some of them swell shovers kicked a bit, but me and the bobby soon made 'em shift."

"Well, really!"

"She's in good trim. I 'ad 'er out on the road this morning and tuned 'er up fine. She's good for a hundred miles easy."

A hundred miles! It was the first hundred yards that bothered me.

"Thank you," I said. "Go into the house"—I delicately indicated the service portion—"and ask them to give you a glass of wine and a cigar."

"Thank yer, sir. Good luck on the road!"

My heart sank as he disappeared through the green baize door, but I was to see him again sooner than I expected.

I went upstairs and changed into my motoring kit. When I came down, dear Muriel, also in

motoring costume, was being kissed by all the females. I saw Lindsay hovering near, but intercepted him. I had had enough of that. There must be some limit to the privileges of a best man.

After various dignified adieux, I took my seat at the wheel.

" You look pale," said Lindsay, who had followed me out. " Have a drink ? "

" No, thank you. My head aches slightly, but I am quite well. Would you mind starting her up for me ? "

After all, he was here for that very purpose. But the " Fast Lady," contrary as ever, started without the least trouble.

Muriel seated herself at my side. It was a proud moment. All the people waved, and cheered, and kissed their hands. As for me, I put her very cautiously into the lowest gear, let in the clutch, accelerated, and we were off ! Down the little drive, and through the gateway, and out into the road of many memories !

" Stop ! " cried Muriel.

I heard her not.

" Stop ! " she cried again. " I've forgotten my umbrella ! "

" Unlucky to go back ! " I shouted. " I'll buy you another ! "

We reached the end of the road in perfect safety and I deemed it time to change up. My heart in my mouth, I did it, and we turned the corner. The house was out of sight.

And then she stopped.

" What's the matter ? " asked Muriel.

Her voice sounded rather funny, so I looked at her. The poor child was crying.

"What's the matter with *you*, my love?" I countered.

"Nothing. Only I—I can't help feeling that I'm—leaving home for ever."

I was not so sure. We were still within a stone's throw of the house.

"I must get down," I explained gently.

"D'you want me to get out?"

"I'm afraid so."

I swung the handle round and she started like an angel. Leaping back into my seat and bidding Muriel follow, I went into low gear and we moved on. Then I changed up and again we stopped.

"What's the matter?" asked Muriel once more.

"I don't know. The brake isn't on. Ted said she was going splendidly this morning. I can't have done anything in this short time."

"It's a long way to Land's End," observed Muriel.

"Yes. I'm afraid I must trouble you again."

Once more we dismounted, and this time I opened the bonnet. Of course, I had no hope of discovering anything that would help. I never have when I open the bonnet. I simply open it because all motorists do open it when the engine stops of its own accord.

"We shall never get to Watford at this rate," murmured Muriel.

"No, my darling," I agreed. "The present rate is no miles an hour, and you can't get far at no miles an hour, can you?"

She burst into tears! Actually burst into tears

within a hundred yards of her home, and people living in all the houses round about who must know her quite well !

" Don't ! " I begged. " Please don't ! I'm sorry I spoke peevishly, but I'm a little overwrought ! Please don't cry ! "

" You don't love me ! " sobbed my wife. " It came to me in church when you looked so awful, and now I know it's true ! I'm married to a man who doesn't love me, and all my life is ruined ! Oh, dear ! Oh, dear ! What am I to do ? What am I to do ? "

This was appalling. Frankly appalling. There we were, standing in the roadway in our new clothes, and there was that damned car—I shall say it—looking as sulky as a drowned beetle. What a start for a honeymoon !

A small boy drew near.

" Anything wrong, guv'nor ? "

" You understand cars ? " I inquired, clutching at a very frail straw.

" No, sir, but my fawver does."

" Where does he work ? "

" Milton & Poppett's."

" What ? Milton & Poppett's ? What's his name ? "

" Ted Bailey, sir."

Ted's son ! An angel from heaven ! Even Muriel smiled through her sobs.

" Look here, my lad," I said eagerly, pressing a shilling into his small, dirty palm, " go round this corner and up the road until you come to a house called ' Guildenstern.' You'll see a lot of cars there, and your father is there, drinking champagne

in the kitchen. Don't say a word to anyone else. Tell him I've broken down round the corner, and ask him to come here at once, very quietly. Nobody else is to know, mind. If you do it very cleverly I'll give you another shilling."

He was off like lightning. In ten minutes he returned with Ted.

"Trouble?" asked Ted, quite unmoved. The stump of cigarette had returned to his upper lip. Four cigars stuck out of his waistcoat-pocket.

I explained my difficulty, and Ted examined.

"You've broken a selector-rod," he announced.

"Is that serious?"

"Well, you don't want to go all the way on bottom gear, do yer?"

"Of course not. How long will it take to repair?"

"Depends. But you won't get off ter-dye, not in the car."

"I won't go back," declared Muriel, and I agreed.

"Tell yer wot we can do," suggested Ted. "I'll run yer down ter the main road and you can put yer things on a taxi and drive to a notel. I'll take the car ter the gerridge, fix 'er up with a new s'lector-rod, and you can 'phone me the plyce yore stoppin'. Best look sharp! They're all gettin' ready ter leave."

It was the only plan. We all three crowded in and made off as fast as the low gear would take us; so Ted did start with us on our honeymoon after all! What is more, his small son was riding on the step. . . .

And now, after all the adventures and emotions of this trying day, here I sit, a married man, writing in my diary.

Muriel bore up wonderfully as soon as we were in the taxi. In fact, I think she was rather pleased at the idea of going to a really swagger London hotel.

One thought troubles me. We are now in the centre of London. Ted will arrive with the car in the morning, and I shall have to drive through miles and miles of dense traffic before we get to the open country. . . .

What is that ? . . .

My darling's voice ! . . .

She will be feeling frightened in this great and gorgeous place. I will go to her.

CHAPTER VIII

EGGS AND THE ATKINSONS

JULY 11.—Well, we are really off this time. It is true that we haven't got very far, but the start counts for a good deal in everything.

Our day began early. There was a telephone in the bedroom of the hotel—a luxury which rather astonished me, though I made no remark—and it rang whilst I was in the bath-room brushing my teeth.

My dear Muriel answered it.

"*Who?*" I heard her saying. "No! You must have got the wrong number! *Who* are you? Ted? Ted who? Oh, yes, I know! Yes, yes, I beg your pardon! I *am* Mrs. Rabbidge! Just for the moment I forgot. Hold on, will you? . . . Darling!"

That was me. I rushed into the room at a great pace. "Yes, darling?"

"It's Ted, darling. He wants to speak to you about the car."

"All right, darling." I took up the receiver. "Is that you, darling? I mean, is that you, Ted? Good morning. Is she all in order?"

She was, and Ted was bringing her up to the hotel right away. From thence onward, all was bustle and confusion. There was the bill to be paid, and

the bags to be packed, and breakfast to be eaten, and Muriel wasn't even out of bed ! She told me I had better go down and have my breakfast and send her up something on a tray.

The waiter handed me a most surprising *menu*. It was even longer than the one we had had for dinner the night before.

" I shall never eat all this, waiter," I said. " To begin with, I haven't the time, and if I had the time I haven't the appetite."

" That's all right, sir," he smiled. " You just choose what you fancy."

" Oh. Is it *à la carte* ? "

" No, sir. There's a fixed price for the breakfast."

" What is the price ? "

" Five shillings, sir."

" Five shillings ? Just for breakfast ? "

" Well, sir, you can have as much as you like for that."

" Am I entitled to all these things ? "

" Certainly, sir, if you wish."

" Very well," I said, nettled. " I'll have them all."

" Very good, sir. Will you start with grapefruit ? "

" Certainly. Don't miss anything out. I'm a business man."

" Tea or coffee, sir ? "

" Both."

" Very good, sir. Porridge, I presume ? And what fish after the porridge ? "

I looked at the list. " Kippers, plaice, and grilled sole."

" Yes, sir. And what to follow ? "

" Bacon and eggs, sausages, kidneys, and cutlets."

" Very good, sir. And then ? "

" Jam and marmalade. I want a lot of toast and rolls and butter and hot milk and cream and sugar. What is the charge for breakfast in a bedroom ? Say, a boiled egg, and a pot of tea, and some dry toast and butter ? "

" The same as in the coffee-room, sir, with an additional charge for serving it upstairs."

" What does it come to, all added up ? "

" Six-and-sixpence, sir."

" Six-and-sixpence for one egg ? "

" Yes, sir. One or twenty—it makes no difference to us."

" Very good. Take up twenty, and see that nineteen of them are hard-boiled."

He went off to give the order, and I dashed up in the lift to warn Muriel. She asked what she should do with nineteen eggs.

" Pack them," I said. " We'll eat them on the road. I'm a business man, and I won't be robbed of six-and-six for one boiled egg."

I then descended again, and was tackling the grape-fruit—beastly sour stuff which spirtled into my eye—when Ted was announced. I told them to show him in.

" Have you had breakfast, Ted ? "

" Well, I 'ad a bite at seven."

" Could you do another ? "

" Might try, sir."

" Good. You're just the man I want." I called a waiter. " Bring another breakfast—a full breakfast, the same as mine—for this gentleman."

The waiter consulted another waiter who consulted the head-waiter. Then the head-waiter approached.

"Excuse me, sir, but we don't serve chauffeurs in the coffee-room. We have a special room set apart for chauffeurs."

"Oh, very well. Serve both breakfasts in there."

"Excuse me, sir, but we don't serve visitors in the chauffeurs' room."

"Are there any more rules in this hotel?" I was really astonished at myself, but I was angry, and it's wonderful how plucky you can be when you're really cross.

"Yes, sir," replied the head-waiter, cheekily. "We have quite a number of other rules."

"Then you can keep them. Come on, Ted. We'll go to Lockhart's and have a decent meal at a reasonable price."

"We shall have to charge you for the breakfast, sir, as you've ordered it," warned the head-waiter, following me up.

"Right. Take a hundred eggs up to Number 487." And I marched out.

Ted and I had a plate of eggs and bacon and two cups of coffee. I think the bill for the two was about three shillings, or it may have been less.

"And now, Ted," said I, lighting a cigarette which he offered me—a new vice for me—"and now, Ted, what about the choosing-pin?"

"The wot, sir?"

"The choosing-pin. Didn't I understand you to say I'd broken a choosing-pin somewhere in the car?"

"Oh, now I see wot you mean—a s'lector-rod."

"That's right. By the way, Ted, in case I'm asked, what is a selector-rod?"

Ted's answer, as nearly as I can remember it, was as follows:

"A s'lector-rod has to do with yer gears. Now, suppose this is yer gear-box. Now, the drive is taken from the clutch to the gear-box by a propeller-shaft, ain't it? Well, now, you 'ave a talk tube and you 'ave a clutch withdrawal collar, 'aven't you? Now, supposin' you want to change up from first to second or from second to third, or you might want to change from top to second or from second to first. It don't make no difference not to wot we're talking abaht at this moment. Well, now, as soon as you transmits yer pressure through yer propeller shaft yer talk comes into action and yer universal joint is set goin', as you might say, like the way I'm movin' this 'ere knife and fork. Well, now, as soon as that 'appens, the spindles gets goin' and engages yer s'lector-rod which takes up yer gear and there you are! That's as clear as daylight, ain't it?"

"Quite, Ted, quite. Have some more coffee."

We were still determined to get to Watford because I had promised dear Muriel that she should call on an old school friend who lived there. So I arranged with Ted to drive us as far as Hendon, after which, he said, it would all be as "easy as pie."

This all in order. I paid the bill--including the two breakfasts--and went up to see how my wife was getting along with the eggs. To my annoyance, only twenty-five had been delivered, so I rang the bell and asked for the other seventy-five to be sent up at once.

"My dear Leonard," expostulated Muriel, "we can't possibly pack ninety-nine eggs. There'll be three of us in the car as far as Hendon, and all our luggage, so I don't see the point——"

"The point, my dear, is this. I have paid for a hundred eggs, and we must take them, otherwise the hotel will have scored a victory, and that would not be fair to other members of the public. Come, be a little bit sporting, old girl, and see how many you can get in your hat-box."

"But they'll break and spoil my hats!"

"No, they won't, because I ordered them hard-boiled. You can get quite thirty into your hat-box. Some we can make into a brown-paper parcel and give to Ted. The rest I'll manage in my suit-case."

The eggs duly arrived. The waiters who brought them up were grinning, but I didn't mind that a scrap. I made a very nice parcel of eggs, and slipped it neatly between the folds of the hood.

All went well as far as Hendon. Of course, Ted made us nearly sick with fright on several occasions, and kept up a running altercation with a taxi-driver for about three miles. Whenever the man passed us he said something fearful to Ted, and then Ted would speed after him and deliver a withering broadside.

"Yus, and mind you get them two love-birds syfe back inside the kyge," was one of the taxi-man's sallies. (Strange how these people get to know things.)

Ted had to wait a whole mile before he could retort, but his chance came at last.

"Torkin' o' kyges," he yelled, the wheels of the two vehicles just touching as we raced alongside,

"since when did they stawt teachin' the monkeys ter drive motors?" (Then we went ahead.)

Half a mile later came the reply. "Never—judgin' by *yore* performance."

Muriel seemed amused, but I considered it undignified.

At Hendon Ted left us, and I was so touched that I forgot to give him the eggs. I took the wheel, and our long tour lay before us.

Just outside Bushey it began to rain.

"Where does your friend live?" I asked my dear one.

"I'm not quite sure. We shall have to ask. Will you ask at that shop?"

"What's your friend's name again?"

"I think it's Atkinson."

"But, my dear, if you don't know her name or where she lives—"

"Oh, all right. If you don't want to go there, why didn't you say so at first? Then we needn't have come all these miles out of our way."

"But I do want to go there! I'm most anxious for you to see your friend! The only thing is, I should have thought, if she was worth all this trouble, you would have remembered——"

"There you are! The first thing I've asked you to do since we were married, and it's a terrible trouble!"

"It's nothing of the sort, but I don't see the point of sitting here and getting drenched through while we argue. I'll put the hood up and then we can discuss the matter in all its bearings."

"I don't want to discuss it, thank you."

"Well, would you mind helping me with the hood?"

Muriel seized her end of the hood—we were still in the car—and I pulled at mine. The hood came up with a jerk, and then there was a sickening crash in the roadway.

We looked at each other. "What was that?" asked Muriel.

"I don't know. What could it have been?"

A small boy came running out of the shop.

"Oy, mister," he shouted, "you've dropped something!" His face looked in at us under the hood.

"What is it, my boy?"

"Dunno, mister, but it's bleedin' through the paper!"

I got out. There was the most appalling mess in the roadway you ever saw. It was the parcel of eggs, of course, which I had placed in the hood, and that wretched hotel had not boiled them hard after all.

"It's some eggs," I said. "You can have them, my lad. Pick them up and take them away, will you?"

"Tommy!" yelled a woman's voice from the doorway, "you come in this moment! 'Ow often 'ave I told you not to get talkin' with strangers?"

I raised my hat. "Could you inform me," I said very politely, "where a lady of the name of Atkinson lives?"

"No, I couldn't," retorted the woman, who was in that frame of mind one associates with washing day. "There's some funny ladies round 'ere, I give you *my* word!" And she disappeared, taking her son with her.

"Ask at the Post Office!" came the voice of Muriel from inside the hood.

"But where is the Post Office?"

"Ask where it is."

"But what about the eggs? We can't leave them lying in the road!"

"Well, you certainly can't put them in the car. Get in quickly and drive away."

This was all very well, but we had yet to find Mrs. Atkinson, and the rain was coming down in torrents. I don't know how many Mrs. Atkinsons there are in Bushey, but they all lived in different directions, and we must have passed and re-passed those eggs quite a dozen times. I tried to run over them and disperse them in that way, but it only made the tyres in a mess, and a piece of the paper stuck to one of them, and made quick slaps against the mudguard as the wheel went round.

"Let's stop and have a little lunch," I suggested.

"Where?" asked Muriel.

"Why, in the car."

"What are we to have?"

"Well, there are still quite a lot of perfect good eggs."

Muriel beat her knees with her clenched fists in the strangest manner.

"I wonder why I married you," she mused, bitterly.

"I have wondered at that," I replied meekly.

"It wasn't for your looks."

"No, darling."

"Or for your money."

"No, darling."

"Or for your brains."

"No, darling."

"Then why on earth did I do it?"

"I rather hoped it might have been for love."

She kissed me at that, and all was well. And we did find Mrs. Atkinson after all.

I stayed in the car this time because we thought, if her husband was out, my appearance might frighten her. I was wearing my leather cap and coat, and a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. I was also very wet from constantly hopping in and out to ask people the way.

The door was opened by a maid, who left Muriel standing in the little porch whilst she went to tell her mistress. Presently Mrs. Atkinson appeared in person, and gave my dear one a frigid stare.

"I didn't catch the name," she opened icily.

"Don't you know me, Mabel?"

"I'm afraid not." She evidently thought it was an attempt at the confidence trick, although the appearance of the car should have reassured her as to our complete respectability.

"I'm Muriel Levendale that was."

"Muriel Levendale?"

"Yes! We were at Hurst Lodge together, and as I happened to be motoring through Bushey with my husband I thought I couldn't possibly——!"

Mrs. Atkinson's face slowly cleared and then lit up vividly.

"Muriel Levendale! Now I remember! We used to pull each other's hair nearly out by the roots!"

"Yes, that's right!"

"Well, fancy! I am glad to see you!" And

they kissed with the utmost affection. "And so you're married, are you?"

"Yes. And you, too!"

"Oh, I've been married for years and got a family of three—two girls and a boy. Have you any family, Muriel?"

Muriel laughed, and said something in an undertone, whereupon they both laughed, and Mrs. Atkinson tried to get a peep at me through the side curtain.

"Won't you come in a minute, Muriel? And your hubby?"

"Well, it must only be for a minute. We're on our way to Land's End!"

"Goodness gracious! You *must* be motorists! Let me take your coat and have it put to the kitchen fire. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Rabbit."

She escorted us into a drawing-room, which looked, as we entered, rather like the photographs of the inner or more sacred shrine of King Tut. The blinds were pulled right down, presumably to keep out the sun, and all the furniture was swathed in ghostly wrappings.

"You must excuse my being unprepared," chattered Mrs. Atkinson, "but, of course, you didn't give me any warning, dear, did you?"

She pulled up the blinds so that we could appreciate the grandeur of the apartment. And it *was* grand, without a doubt. Like the Temple of King Solomon, everything was of gold, nothing was of silver. The chairs were gold—at least, their feet were—and the sofa was gold, and the clock under the glass shade was gold, and the candlesticks were gold, and all the pictures were framed in gold.

There was even a stuffed Bird of Paradise in a gold cage.

" Now, you'll stop and have a cup of tea, won't you ? " pressed Mrs. Atkinson. " It won't take a minute to get and you must be cold after driving in all that rain ! "

Muriel said she would be delighted, and looked at me. I said I should be more than delighted.

" That's capital," declared Mrs. Atkinson, who was evidently impressed with the car and our motoring kit. " Make yourselves quite at home while I go and speak about tea."

She hurried out.

" Well," said Muriel, " what about it ? "

" Delightful ! " I exclaimed. " A charming woman and a really beautiful home ! "

" Glad you think so," sniffed Muriel. " I think this room is perfectly appalling, and as for poor Mabel—— ! "

" Is anything the matter with her ? She looked to me strong and well ! "

" Oh, she's healthy enough, but her figure ! And her complexion ! And that terrible dress ! And she used to be quite a passable girl ! "

" How long is it since you saw her ? "

" Not since I left school. Quite six years."

" Oh ! You've corresponded, I suppose ? "

" Not for years. I heard quite by chance that she was married and living in Bushey."

" Then don't be cross with me for asking, but I want to get to understand—why so much anxiety to visit her ? "

" To see her house, of course, and her husband, and what she looked like. Men *are* so dense ! "

Mrs. Atkinson came back in a different dress and her hair tidied. The moment she opened the door Muriel put on a smile of the most extraordinary sweetness, and kept it on her face all the time we stayed. The two little girls and the little boy were brought in. The little girls would persist in keeping their fingers in their mouths, which caused their mother to smack their bare arms, upon which they burst into loud howls and were taken out again. As for the little boy, he was a mere child in arms. Muriel asked, as though it were a tremendous favour, if she might "hold him." The mother consented graciously, but the child himself was extremely annoyed at this catch-as-catch-can business, and screamed even more loudly than his sisters.

And so he, in his turn, was taken back whence he came, much to my relief.

We were just on the point of leaving when Mr. Atkinson returned from the City or somewhere. He and I were promptly left alone while our wives went upstairs for a couple of hours.

The moment his wife had disappeared Mr. Atkinson took me into the dining-room and produced a decanter of whisky and a siphon of soda. I explained that I never took anything of the kind, but he said *he* did - so he did. We then stood in the window and stared gloomily at the car.

"Going far?" he inquired.

"Land's End," I replied.

He lit a pipe, and we remained silent for a long while.

"Wet," he observed at last.

"Very," I agreed.

" Ah, well," said Mr. Atkinson, and had another small spot.

We got away at seven, explaining that we had booked a room and ordered dinner at the hotel. This was not strictly true, but I meant it to come true. The Atkinsons waved us farewell from the doorway, one gay and one lugubrious.

CHAPTER IX

A TERRIBLE ADVENTURE AT WATFORD

"WELL," asked Muriel, as we slid nicely away down the hill that led to Watford, "and how did you get on with Mr. Atkinson?"

"Splendidly," I told her. "A charming fellow."

"Mabel complains that he never speaks to her."

"Really? He spoke to me on more than one topic."

"What did you talk about?"

"Oh, the car and the weather, you know."

"Good. I'm glad you made friends, because I've asked them to come and stay with us when we get back."

"How nice! Will they be able to bring the children?"

"The baby, perhaps, but I don't think we should have room for them all."

"A pity."

It was just as I uttered the last two hypocritical words that the "Fast Lady" stopped. The Atkinsons lived away from the main road, so that to get into Watford from their house you had to descend a by-road and turn left to reach the main road. As I have indicated, we ran very well down the hill, and round the corner. Then she stopped.

" What are you stopping for ? " asked my wife.

" *I'm* not stopping, my darling."

" Yes, you are. We're both stopping."

" Forgive my being precise, darling, but the car has stopped with us in it. One must guard against expressing oneself loosely."

" I do wish you wouldn't argue quite so much, Leonard. I'm fearfully hungry. Why don't you get out and see what's the matter with the beastly thing ? "

" Because I shouldn't know if I got out."

" Then you ought not to offer to drive people to Land's End."

" I didn't offer to drive people. I offered to drive you. You are not people, darling. You are my wife, and a man and his wife are one."

" Oh, chuck it ! Can you do anything to make it go or can't you ? "

" Short of pushing it, I don't think I can. And we can't push it because it's uphill."

" Then what do you propose to do ? "

" Wait till an expert comes along."

" Do you suppose an expert is likely to come along this miserable lane at this time of the evening ? It'll be dark in another hour ! "

" My experience is that motor experts pass along all roads at the rate of one a minute. Look ! Here's one coming ! "

It was a man with one of those small cans for hot cocoa that usually indicate some connection with a railway. He halted, as I knew he would, and asked if there was anything the matter.

" Well, thank you," I said, " my engine has stopped."

A TERRIBLE ADVENTURE AT WATFORD 129

" Shall I give 'er a swing ? " he suggested.

" If you would be so good."

He put down his little can, grasped the starting-handle, and swung it round and round with the utmost vigour. I wondered if he was going on duty or coming off. In either case, it did not seem right to let him exert himself so much.

The Flick didn't care. She made no response. He might have been turning a grindstone or a mangle.

" She don't fire," he observed, wiping the perspiration from his brow.

" No," I fully agreed.

" You've got 'er switched on all right, I suppose ? "

" Oh, yes, she's fully switched on. In fact, we've done several quite good miles to-day."

" Funny." He opened the bonnet, which was inevitable, and worked busily at the needle of the carburettor. I could hear the petrol simply hissing out. I think our friend was trying to give an imitation of a petrol fountain.

" I wouldn't overdo that," I said mildly. I had been reading all the motoring journals, and they all laid stress on the delicacy of the carburettor needle.

" Let's try 'er now. Got yer ignition retarded ? "

" Yes, thanks. It's nicely retarded." To tell the truth, I was not quite sure which way to push the lever.

Once again he grasped the handle and swung. Almost immediately there was a tremendous report, and the poor fellow went backwards into the roadway. I scrambled out and ran to his assistance.

"Are you hurt?" I cried.

He felt his wrist and right arm very carefully.

"There's nothing broke as I can tell at present, but that was a nasty back-fire. Let's 'ave a look at the ignition."

I trembled, feeling sure that I should be in the wrong. And I was.

"Oy!" called the man. "Look 'ere! You got it fully advanced! No wonder she back-fired! You might 'ave broke my arm!"

"I'm really very sorry. You see, I'm not very expert at present."

"I should say not." (Here I mollified him with a shilling.) "The best thing you can do is to send along to the gerridge just up top o' the hill. Bear right and then left. You can't miss it. Good night."

And off he went. It was all very well to tell me to send to the garage, but who was I to send? I could not go myself and leave Muriel alone in this deserted road. We could not both go and leave the car. All this I explained to my wife at some length.

"That's all right," said Muriel with characteristic pluck. "I'll go."

I didn't at all like it, but there was still a good deal of light, and the man had said it was not far.

"Be very careful," I implored her. "You'll find me here when you come back."

"That's the only thing I'm sure of," retorted Muriel. And off she went.

Now this last remark put me on my mettle. I began to think of all the things Ted would do.

A TERRIBLE ADVENTURE AT WATFORD 131

Most of them, of course, I was quite incapable of doing, but couldn't I attempt *some* small thing? After all, if the expert was coming from the garage it couldn't very much matter what I did.

Ted had given me a list of things to do daily, every two days, weekly, and monthly. I got it out of my pocket, and read it through in the fading light.

(1) "Grease front axel swivle pins top and bottom."

(2) "Fill up tank."

(3) "Fill up radiator."

(4) "Examine oil in crank-case."

(5) "Oil the fan."

Which of all these should I do? The first was quite beyond me, and I felt sure the second and third were unnecessary. The fourth I could not manage, having no idea where the crank-case was or how you got at it to examine it.

But the fifth! Oil the fan! That, at any rate, I could do. Who knew? Motor engines are curious things, and it might just be that the fan wanted some oil and that was why the engine had stopped.

Anyway, I oiled the fan. I gave it plenty. I did not stint the oil. I was desperate and wanted my dinner. So did my poor Muriel.

Now for it. The carburettor was well flooded, the spark was switched on, the ignition was retarded. (I saw to that this time.) Seizing the handle with the courage of despair, I gave it a sharp pull.

She started! I had done it! All by myself, I had succeeded where the railway man had failed!

I could now pursue Muriel to the garage and give her a glad surprise !

Clambering quickly to my place, off I went. Oh, the joy to feel the beautiful little carriage once again on the move !

Round the bend—that was right. What did he say then ?

" Garage ? " I shouted to some passing labourers.

" Straight on ! "

On I went, and at last came to some mean houses. My Muriel had come this way all alone and walking. I vowed to make it up to her with a lovely box of chocolates.

And then the engine stopped again. . . .

Without the slightest hesitation, I descended from the car and oiled the fan. I then jerked at the starting-handle, just as I had done a few minutes before— and nothing happened ! I gave the fan even more oil ; I drenched it with oil ; still no result. It was absurd to keep on oiling the fan, so I oiled one or two other places that looked promising, after each application jerking at the handle.

Not a sign of a response from the Flick. Night was closing in now with such rapidity that I thought I had better light the lamps. They were oil-lamps, and I had never tried to light them before. In point of fact, I had made up my mind never to be out after dark. Yet here I was, the very first day out from London, wanting the lamps. *Eheu fugaces !*

The lamps, unhappily, had not been trimmed, and therefore would not light. A small crowd had now gathered round the Flick, and I asked if anybody

A TERRIBLE ADVENTURE AT WATFORD 133

knew where I could get my lamps trimmed. They all answered at once, which made it impossible to profit by any information they had to bestow. So I went back to oiling and jerking.

Presently a man who had been watching me for some time in silence stepped forward and opened the bonnet. I was not surprised, because I had learnt by this time that people in England—well, all over the world for anything I know to the contrary—have a mania for opening all bonnets of all motors.

I did not say anything, but I watched him as carefully as I could through the gathering gloom. He might have intended to steal some important part of the machinery, such as the fan.

“Pore young feller!” murmured a woman in the crowd. I think she must have meant me because the other man was well advanced in years.

He proved to be the fiercest fellow with a motor-engine I had as yet encountered. He seized hold of the carburettor-needle and worked it up and down like a dog worrying a rat. He appeared to be furious with the poor “Fast Lady.”

“I wouldn’t do that too much if I were you,” I said.

“Wouldn’t you? What would you do?” he retorted.

“I—er—I think I should try something else.”

“What else?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I don’t quite know.”

“There you are, then!” cried the man, and gave the needle a most tremendous doing. “It’s always these blooming carberettors,” he muttered. “Come

on with yer! Come on, now! You come out of it!"

I began to wonder if he had been drinking. Indeed, there was a decided aroma of alcohol about the whole party. Perhaps they had all been drinking. I wished they would go away and drink some more, because if Muriel came back with the man from the garage she might easily pass by without her seeing me or me her.

At last the fellow tired of his brutality, and came round to the body of the vehicle.

"How's yer throttle?" he asked.

"All right, thank you," I replied.

"Is it open or shut?"

"Shut," I said, letting him see by my tone that I was not to be treated with impunity.

"Well, open it," ordered the man. "You'll be here all night else."

"Don't you wait if you're busy," I counselled.

He gave me a hard look, and did something to the wheel. Then he returned to the front of the car, and turned the handle. To my surprise, the Flick roared like a wounded animal, and smoke came pouring out of the little pipe at the back.

"Throttle 'er down!" shouted the man.

I pretended not to hear, so he came and did it himself. Gradually the roars subsided, and the regular beat to which I was accustomed took its place. Springing lightly into the driving seat, I engaged the lowest gear and drove off into the darkness.

At any moment, as I knew well, I might be stopped by a policeman and arrested. But my one

A TERRIBLE ADVENTURE AT WATFORD 135

hope was to get to the garage, where I should find my wife—unless she had been kidnapped—and could get my lamps trimmed.

The road led me uphill, and into the main road, as I judged, to Watford. Soon I found myself once again descending a hill. Could Muriel have walked all this way? If so, what did the first man mean by saying the garage was not far off?

At last I saw the lights of the town before me, and on the left at the bottom of the hill was a garage. I pulled up and hurried into the office.

“Is there a lady here?” I panted.

A man at the desk looked up, looked round the office, and shook his head.

“Has there been one here within the last hour?”

“Not to my knowledge,” he answered, and my heart sank once more.

“I broke down some distance back,” I explained, “and my wife came on to the nearest garage to get assistance. Then I got the engine going, but I broke down again, so much valuable time has been lost. Now I don’t know where she is, and it’s quite late, and I don’t think she’s got any money with her, and she doesn’t know her way about Watford, and we didn’t arrange where we were going to stay, and my lamps are not trimmed.”

He fastened on to the last item like a wolf.

“You want yer lamps trimmed?”

“Yes, please; and I want to find my wife if I can. It’s awful to think of her wandering about by herself on those dark, lonely roads. We were only married yesterday,” I added, thinking he might as well know all there was to be known.

He pressed a bell, and an assistant appeared.

"Just trim this gentleman's lamps," was the order.

The assistant went away.

"Now, where did you say you broke down?"

"Well, we came along the London road, and we turned off to the right to see some friends of the name of Atkinson. Do you know the Atkinsons by any chance?"

"There's lots of Atkinsons about here. Maybe the lady's gone back there."

A good idea. I would telephone. I waded all through the Atkinsons, and at last found our Atkinsons. Mr. Atkinson himself answered the 'phone.

"Oh, good evening," I said eagerly. "My name is Rabbidge. My wife and I were at your house a few hours ago, and now I've unfortunately lost her. Has she by any chance returned to you?"

"No," said Mr. Atkinson.

"She hasn't? You've seen nothing of her since we left your house in the car?"

"No," said Mr. Atkinson.

"Oh, thank you! Well, if she should turn up—I don't think it's likely, but she might—will you tell her to get a taxi and drive to the principal hotel and ask for me? If I'm not there she's to wait till I turn up. Is that quite clear?"

"Yes," said Mr. Atkinson. I thought I heard a faint sigh as he hung up the receiver.

The man in the office now had a bright idea.

"There's another garage," he said, "farther back on the main road. Maybe the lady went there."

"But I took the first turning to the left. At

least, I think I did, but of course it was getting dark."

"No harm in ringing up and seeing if she went there. Shall I do it for you?"

"If you would be so good."

"Hallo," he said very calmly. "That you, Arthur? Have you had a lady in an hour or two back about some repair to a small two-seater? . . . Eh? . . . Oh . . . Oh! . . . I see. . . . Eh! . . . She did, eh? . . . Oh! . . . You couldn't? . . . Eh? . . . Yes, the gent's here now. . . . All right, Arthur. How's the missus? . . . Good night, old man."

"Well, well?" I gasped.

"The lady went there all right, and she and Arthur went down the road to where you was—leastways, to where you should have been—but there was no one there."

"Then we did miss each other on the road?"

"Seems like it."

"Good gracious! What a chapter of accidents! What did they do then?"

"The lady went back to Arthur's place and they rang up 'The Arms,' but you wasn't there. So they rang up 'The Rose,' and you wasn't there either. So Arthur told the lady she'd better jump on a bus and go into the town and wait till you arrived. So the lady went, and that's all Arthur knows."

"Dear, dear! What a confusion! And she must be starving and probably frightened to death wondering what has become of me. Where are these places you mentioned?"

"Oh, in the main street."

"Thank you very much. If I don't find her at either of them, I shall go to the police station."

The lamps were now ready, so I paid the bill and left. I remember nothing about that drive into the town, except that I had to go under a huge railway bridge, and, I think, over another bridge, and then through a very narrow and very crowded street. Then I suddenly remembered that I had entirely forgotten the names of the hotels mentioned by the man at the garage !

I asked seven people the name of the principal hotel, and they all said, maddeningly, that they were strangers in Watford ! Why is it that when you ask the way you always ask it of a stranger ? How I loathe the sickly smile with which they say, "I'm a stranger here meself" !

The shortest way out of the difficulty seemed to be to turn round and drive back to the garage. It was very difficult to turn in that narrow thoroughfare, but a lot of people helped, and at last I sighted once again the huge railway bridge.

And then she stopped. . . .

It was the last straw. I simply sat there and let the tears roll down my face. Unmanly weakness, I admit, but I had had no solid food all day, and my anxiety about Muriel had set my nerves on edge.

A man came along and asked if he should have a look at the carburettor. I told him not to touch it, and added that I had a perfect right to sit there and take the night air as long as I liked.

In the end I got down and walked to the garage and found a message from Muriel, who had rung up all the garages in the town. She said she had

A TERRIBLE ADVENTURE AT WATFORD 139

ordered a Porterhouse steak and a bottle of Burgundy and braised onions and fried potatoes, and would I please hurry.

Hurry ! I was in such a hurry that I would not trust myself to drive. A man from the garage took me and the Flick to the hotel.

CHAPTER X

I WAKE THEM UP AT BATH

JULY 18.—So much has happened since I last wrote in this chronicle that I hardly know where to begin! When I left off I was being driven as fast as the "Fast Lady" would go to the hotel in Watford, there to clasp my dear recovered Muriel in my arms and do my duty by the Porterhouse steak and the braised onions and the fried potatoes.

Well, I did all the latter part, but I could not express my joy at seeing my dear wife safe and sound as enthusiastically as I should have wished because she was already seated at the table in the coffee-room having her supper. However, to celebrate the glad occasion I had a little wine, which got into my head and seemed to afford dear Muriel considerable amusement.

In the morning I rose very early to attend to the Flick. I asked the ostler, who was good enough to help me fill up the radiator—the one job that every ostler and garage man is quite perfect at and seems to love doing—whether there were any objects of interest in Watford that my wife and I ought to see before proceeding on our way.

The ostler thought for a long time, and then suggested the brewery. I said I did not think we

should care for that, upon which he became almost violent in his praise of the brewery. He assured me it was not only the best brewery in the county, but one of the finest in England.

"If you was to step outside this 'ere yard at this moment," said the ostler, "and the wind 'appened to be in the right direction, you could smell that brewery as plain as plain! And before the war, when beer *was* beer, you could smell it whichever way the wind was! I've seen men knock off work to 'ave a sniff, and then commence again as fresh as if they'd swallowed a pint!"

I gave Muriel the chance of visiting the brewery because I didn't want her to complain afterwards. She declined the invitation, as I expected, and we set off at nine o'clock with the ostler's reproaches still rumbling in our ears.

The road from Watford to Maidenhead is not good. If you study the map, as I do constantly throughout the journey, you will see that it is really a series of by-roads, and these had not been improved by the heavy rain of the previous day. We skidded rather badly once or twice, and Muriel seemed to think it was my fault, but I pointed out to her, rather rashly, that we should not have been on these roads at all but for her passionate desire to visit her old school-friend, Mrs. Atkinson.

She will be sorry some day for what she said in reply.

I shall not record her words. They were pithy and plentiful, and they all stung.

Soon after that I pulled up.

"What's the matter with the thing, now?" asked Muriel, who, I have discovered since our

marriage, is not at her best in the mornings, whereas, if anything, I am.

" Nothing," I replied. " I stopped it on purpose."

" That's a novelty. Why ? "

" I have a great treat for you, my dear. This is the village of Stoke Poges." Muriel looked blank. " The birthplace," I reminded her, " of Thomas Gray, the poet."

" Never heard of him," said Muriel. " Get on."

" But my dear ! You must have heard of Gray, the author of the immortal Elegy ? "

" Oh, that chap ! I had to learn it at school. Some rot about the herds winding over the Leas. Always reminds me of Folkestone."

I stood up in the car and removed my hat. I then recited the beautiful stanza which seems to apply so particularly to myself :

" *' Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood,
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.'* "

" What's all that ? " asked Muriel.

" A beautiful stanza from the Elegy, my dear. Now we will go and see the churchyard where it was written."

" Not on your life," decided Muriel. " You can go, if you like. I'll stop and have a gasper and mind the car."

So I went alone, very reverently, hat in hand. I found the tomb of the poet, but what I particularly wanted to see was the nodding elm that

wreathed its old fantastic roots so high. To my intense disappointment I could not find it, and the churchyard was not at all as I had pictured it. To begin with, there's a high hedge all round, so I don't understand how he *could* have seen the lowing herd winding o'er the lea. Of course, he might have heard them.

We proceeded on the "tenor of our way," which could hardly be called "noiseless," and reached Reading in time for lunch. Muriel, who is not nearly so uninformed as she tries to appear, told me that Reading was famous for biscuits. Just to encourage her, I expressed surprise.

After lunch, we went to look at the statue of the first Mr. Palmer—or it may be the original Huntley. Anyway, it is a noble piece of work, and shows the old gentleman with his umbrella. A nice homely touch. If I am ever sculpted, which seems, at the moment, unlikely, I should like to be done with my butterfly net, in the very act of catching a butterfly. The butterfly itself need not be shown. That would be too difficult. I suppose it would have to be suspended from the summit of the Town Hall or something, which would add enormously to the expense.

I rather wanted to stay the night at Reading, but Muriel said we must push on to Bath! Bath, mind you! Over a hundred miles from Watford! Still, *noblesse oblige*! I set my teeth and we left Reading behind.

It was quite dark by the time we reached Bath, and I was extremely tired. As we drove along, I told Muriel to look out for some quiet, unpretentious, inexpensive hostelry, and she said she would.

We found the very place—at least, it looked the very place from the outside. The street was quiet and the building unpretentious. But when I had put the car in the garage, and was escorted up to our room by the porter, my mind misgave me.

I had never seen such a bedroom! It was bigger than the board-room at our offices, and furnished in the most regal manner! As for the chamber-maid, she was as tall and stately as Queen Mary, and tremendously aristocratic in her manner. It was the nearest thing in the world that I didn't call her "miss."

"How much is it?" I whispered to Muriel.

"I really don't know," she replied, carelessly. "You oughtn't to think about the price of things on your honeymoon, Leonard."

She was quite right, the dear girl. But, at this rate, how long would the honeymoon last? . . . Two beautiful mahogany wardrobes with mirrors! . . .

I was extremely tired, as may be imagined, after my long drive of over one hundred miles, and it was quite late when we arrived at the hotel. Immediately after a light supper, therefore, we retired to rest, and I was asleep the moment my head touched the pillow.

I was awakened by the sound of male voices, singing. Could it be already morning? Surely I had not been asleep so long? It seemed but an instant since I closed my eyes.

*" ' I'd like to fall asleep and wake up
In my mammy's arms.' "*

declared a lusty tenor.

I opened my eyes. The room was quite dark. Yet the dawn breaks very early in July! What could be the meaning of this musical activity? At Christmas one could have understood it, but at midsummer, no!

*" ' I passed by your window,
The morning was red ' "*

chanted a bass voice. Then came a rumble of wheels, followed by cheerful dialogue.

" Seen Bob lately ? "

" Bob ? No, I ain't seen 'im for a fortnight or more. 'Ow's 'e going on ? "

" Oh, not so bad. I met his old woman yesterday afternoon. She don't get no younger."

" No more don't mine, come to that. It's the common lot, yer know, Jim."

" That's right."

*" ' When you and I were dancing,
Pom-pom —pom —tiddley---um, ' "*

sang Jim.

Extraordinary! What could they be doing? Not burglars, of course.

At this juncture, as I had feared, my dear Muriel woke up.

" What's the matter ? " she asked sleepily.
" What's all that noise ? "

" People singing," I replied soothingly.

" Singing ? Where ? Why ? "

" I don't know why, but they're singing in the street."

"What time is it?"

"About half-past two."

"Well, tell them to stop. They've no right to wake people up at this hour of the morning."

I got out of bed and went across to the window. We had left it wide open, the night being hot, so I put out my head. In the street below was a huge van, and the men were loading it with something that looked like sacks. They were quite unconscious, I am sure, that their voices carried so far in the quietness of the night.

"Excuse me," I said.

One of them stopped working, and looked up the street and then down it.

"Did you 'ear that, George?" he asked.

"'Ear what?"

"Somebody spoke."

"Yes, I know. I did."

"I don't mean you. I knows your voice." (I should think he did!) "This was a sort of a 'igh voice."

"What did it say?"

"Sounded like, 'Excuse me.'"

"Oh, get on with it! You 'ad one too many with yer supper."

*" ' But last night in the back porch
I liked her best of all.' "*

chanted the tenor.

"For heaven's sake tell them to shut up," came the voice of my dear Muriel, a little peevishly, from the bed.

"Excuse me!" I called, in a louder tone.

"There's that bloke excusin' 'imself again," echoed from below.

They both stopped working this time, and began to scan the windows of the hotel. Suddenly one of them pointed.

"There you are! What did I tell yer? There's a 'ead!"

"That's right! Is it a male 'ead or a female?"

"Can't rightly tell."

"I am sorry," I said clearly, "to have to interfere with your pleasure, but we can't get to sleep and we're very tired."

"'Ear that, George? 'E says 'e don't want to interfere with our pleasure! That takes it, that does!"

"May I suggest," I continued, "that you leave whatever you re doing now, and come back and finish it in the morning?"

They stared at one another and then looked up at me.

"Do you know what we *are* a-doin', guvnor?"

"No, I certainly do not, but it seems a strange time to do it, whatever it is."

"Well, I'll tell yer, sir. We're collectin' 'Is Majesty's Miles."

"I beg your pardon?"

"'Is Majesty's Miles—letters."

"Oh, I see. But couldn't that be done later—say at six or seven? Nobody can possibly want letters at this hour of the morning!"

"Well, sir," came from below, "it's this way. This job 'as been done at this hour of the morning for the last hundred years, and nobody ain't never complained before."

" What does he say ? " asked Muriel from the bed.

" He says, my dear, that he's collecting His Majesty's mails, and they've been doing it at this hour of the morning for the last hundred years."

" Oh, they have, have they ? "

Muriel switched on the light, put on her *peignoir*, and came over to the window. I held on to her belt in case in her excitement she fell into the street. It would be awful to have a coroner's inquest on one's honeymoon, though you do occasionally hear of such things.

" This one's a female," muttered George.

" Yes, it is ! " replied dear Muriel, in high tones. " If you think we're going to put up with this sort of thing, you're very much mistaken. It may be your duty to collect the mails at two in the morning, but it's not your duty to bawl and bellow and wake up everybody in the street ! Can't you have a little more consideration for other people ? Just because you have to be up, is that any reason why other people shouldn't have any sleep ? Suppose there happened to be somebody ill round here ? A nice thing for you two men to be carrying on like that ! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves ! If I have any more of it I shall go to the post-master in the morning and lodge a very serious complaint ! "

The dear girl went back to bed and clicked off the light.

I listened for a long time, but there was no more singing.

The last sound I heard was the van rumbling away with His Majesty's mails. Strange, the in-

fluence of one frail girl when she really means what she says. . . . His Majesty's mails put to silence after a hundred years ! . . .

To my very great delight, and a little to my surprise, Muriel agreed to spend a short time in Bath and look at the sights. This pleased me very much because neither of us had ever previously visited this famous and picturesque city, and I dare say it will be forty or fifty years before I come this way again. Not, at any rate, until I am in my dotage.

The first thing I did after breakfast was to dash out to the nearest stationer's and buy a guide-book. They had them at all prices, from three-and-six to fourpence. I decided on a fourpenny one, which proved to be full of charm.

"What are we going to see first ?" asked Muriel, stamping picture post cards with the sure touch of the expert.

"The Baths !" I replied instantly. "The Roman Baths ! Fancy, my dear ! They were erected in the reign of Claudius !"

"Don't remember him. When did he come on the scene ?"

"Oh, he wasn't one of our kings, you know, darling. He was a Roman Emperor."

"What was he doing in Bath, then ?"

"Well, you see, my dear, the Romans lived very dissipated lives, and I expect they came here for their health, just as dissipated English people go to Buxton and Leamington and places like that. 'The hot springs,' " I read aloud, before she could question me further, which might end in slightly undermining my authority, "'are chalybeate and saline,

and the daily outflow is nearly 185,000 gallons.' Think of that, Muriel ! "

" Do you mean to say all that water comes out hot ? "

" Yes, indeed I do ! Isn't it wonderful ! "

" What do they do with it ? "

" Well, in olden days, I fancy, they used to bathe in it, but now the people drink it."

" Disgusting," was Muriel's comment.

" I think we ought to have a glass, don't you ? "

" I don't see why. *We're* not dissipated, Heaven knows."

" Well, just to be able to say we've done it."

" If we want to say that we can say it without doing it. Come on ! Let's go and get it over."

We were soon at the Baths—such a quaint, delightful old place, with a real old Bath chair just to show you what they were like. And there was the water bubbling up, all hot, and people with their old-fashioned glasses waiting to drink it.

Muriel still refused to touch it, but I had a glass, and it did not make me feel as sick as I had expected. In point of fact, I could tell it was doing me good because I felt so mentally alert.

We then descended to the Baths with a guide, who seemed a little sad but was well up in his subject. I suppose there would be thirty people in our party, mostly very timid. I have noticed at other places of historical interest that people are afraid to ask questions of the guide, and often go away without having had full value for their sixpence. I determined to ransack this matter of the hot springs very thoroughly.

The guide started off by telling us a lot about the

date of the Baths and the construction. It was all very interesting, but did not seem to me to go to the root of the matter.

"Excuse me," I said loudly, raising my hat, "but where is this hot spring you speak of?"

"In the bowels of the earth," replied the guide, giving me a lack-lustre look—the sort of look that you get from a fish when it's lying on a marble slab, except that you only see one eye of the fish owing to the frontal formation. "So far as we are able to determine——" he continued.

"Just a moment, sir." I again raised my hat. "What makes this water hot?"

"That we do not know," replied the guide. "In the days of the Emperor Claudius——"

"But, surely," I persisted, "all these learned professors and people who have studied the matter must have some idea what makes the water hot?"

"The gentleman had better consult them personally," stung the guide, whereupon somebody sniggered and Muriel gave me a heavy frown. That was all very well, but one did not come to Bath every day, and I wanted to know. So I waited my opportunity.

"This," went on the guide, "is the smaller of the two main baths, and was probably used by the Roman ladies at the time of the Emperor Claudius."

"Was the water hot at that time?" I put in.

"We presume so."

"But why should you presume so?"

"From the fact of their bathing in it. We will now proceed to the larger bath, and there I would call your attention——" And so forth.

And now we were nearing the scene of my adventure. A little farther on the guide showed us the actual hot water running into the bath. You could see the steam rising up! Even Muriel admitted that it was "a bit posh"!

"How hot is that water?" I demanded.

"Just a comfortable heat," replied the guide.

"But opinions vary, my good sir, as to what is or is not a comfortable heat. Now, when I take a bath——"

"The gentleman can test the heat of the water for himself, if he wishes."

I said I would, and stooped down to put my fingers in the water. Unfortunately, the stonework was much worn at this spot, with the consequence that I slipped, lost my balance, and fell head first into the Roman Baths!

What a terrible thing to happen to anyone on one's honeymoon! I was frightened at first, because I thought the bath might be very deep, or the water so hot that it would scald me to death. But I soon found myself standing upright in the bath, and the water just comfortably warm.

Muriel was very red in the face, poor dear, but all the other people were laughing, which seemed poor taste, and even the guide had a sort of smirk on his pallid features.

As for me, I determined to carry off the situation with a high hand.

"The temperature of the water is quite pleasant," I told the company.

"Look at your hat!" called out somebody.

I had forgotten my hat—the straw one, you

know, with the ribbon of the Camberwell Entomological Society, which I carry in the dickey for use on such semi-official occasions as the one I am describing.

Looking round quickly, I saw my hat disappear through a little tunnel which, if I remember rightly, connects the larger bath with the smaller. Well, a hat is a hat these days, so I dashed after it.

The hat was now floating, hollow side uppermost, in the centre of the bath. In two or three strides I should have reached it, but some careless workman of the time of the Emperor Claudius had left a large piece of masonry at the bottom of the bath, which tripped me up, and in I went once more, this time being completely submerged.

The guide was now very cross indeed, as though I had done it all on purpose. He said no human being had bathed in those Baths for at least two thousand years, and that I had broken the record. I pointed out that it was most dangerous to leave large pieces of masonry at the bottom of the bath, and that if the workmen employed by the Emperor Claudius knew no better, it was time some modern fellow got at it.

"Idiot!" hissed Muriel as we ascended to the street level, leaving pools of the sacred water as we went. "How on earth are you going to get back to the hotel?"

"Why, in that ancient chair," I explained, brightly.

But nobody had ridden in that, it seemed, since the time of Beau Brummell, and they didn't seem to regard me as his legitimate successor. So we had to walk, followed by a crowd of tourists, who thought—

I suppose on account of my leather coat—that I was a diver engaged on further excavations.

The hotel people were quite nice when they heard what had happened. The porter said Bath wanted waking up a bit, and took me up to our floor in the luggage lift.

I went to bed whilst my things were dried, and late in the afternoon we visited the Post Office, which is comparatively modern.

CHAPTER XI

MURIEL GETS OUT AND WALKS

MURIEL said we were too well known in Bath to stay any longer, so we decided to move on to Bristol. Our direct route, I know, would have been by way of Wells, but we both wished to see Bristol, of which we had so often and so favourably heard.

Bristol stands on the river Avon, and the water comes right into the town. Silver pennies were struck here in the reign of Ethelred the Unready, a monarch with whom I have had a lifelong, though necessarily sneaking, sympathy. There was also a slave market here at one time, but I did not tell Muriel that, since it seemed vaguely depressing.

A very large number of cigarettes are manufactured in Bristol, which reminded me of my friend and best man, Lindsay Mountford. Thinking he might like to have a souvenir of the town, I bought him a packet of ten cigarettes in a neat yellow casing, and sent them off by post, together with a post card showing the Cathedral (S.W. aspect).

The principal street in Bristol is known to practically everybody as Park Street. It is very steep and goes straight up. I said I did not think

the " Fast Lady " would do it, but Muriel said she would, so I put her at it.

We got about half-way up—I must tell you it was the busiest hour of the morning, and all the good Bristolians and Cliftonians were shopping away like twelve o'clock—we got about half-way up, I say, when the poor little engine began to go slower and slower, and I wondered what would happen next.

" What's the matter ? " asked Muriel.

" She won't achieve it," I said.

" What are you going to do ? " she inquired.

" Stop," I said.

I put on the side-brake as hard as I could, and the foot-brake also. That was all very well as far as it went, but we couldn't very well stick in the middle of Park Street for ever.

A man who looked as if he might be a harmless lunatic stepped off the pavement and came round to my side.

" Won't she go up ? " he asked, smiling.

" Oh, yes," I said, humouring him. " We're just stopping to admire the city." A policeman overheard this, and also came and stood close to the car. " You can't stop here," he said. " It's against the regulations."

" I'm not stopping voluntarily," I explained.

" But I heard you tell this gentleman you were stopping to admire the city. Isn't that right, sir ? "

" That was sarcasm," I explained. " I stopped because my engine is not sufficiently powerful to propel us to the summit. If you, constable,

and one or two other gentlemen would kindly give me a push, I think I could manage it."

There was rather a large crowd by this time, and the constable, quite clearly, wished to be rid of me.

"Can't you go back?" he suggested.

"Very easily," I told him, "if I took the brakes off. But I couldn't guarantee any particular direction. I should probably end up in the river."

"If the lady gets out, we'll give yer a shove," said a man with a nice West Country face.

This seemed a good notion, so Muriel alighted, and my bodyguard began to shove. I, for my part, applied all the force of which the engine was capable, and we forged ahead.

"She'll go now!" shouted somebody, and I realised that I was alone. For a moment the Flick held on up the hill; then she stopped and began to slide backwards. I tried to check her, but the side-brake simply came away in my hand!

From that moment on, everything happened very rapidly. I passed backwards through the little knot of helpers, and had a glimpse of Muriel on the pavement, clasping her hands as girls will. The constable was left staring. I gave one quick look behind, and saw a huge van in the act of turning, some fifty yards below me. With some indistinct idea of avoiding it, I gave the wheel a twist, mounted the pavement with my rear wheels, and came to a halt amid a terrific crashing of glass. The last thing I remember was an overpowering smell of chocolate. (This was accounted for, as

I afterwards heard, by the fact that my head was embedded in a newly-baked chocolate cake, the Flick having pulled up in the window of a well-known confectioner's.)

When I came to I was lying on the pavement, surrounded by a very large number of people with nice West Country faces.

"'E's dead," I heard a small boy say.

"What killed 'im?" inquired a girl.

"'E was suff'cated with choc'late," explained the boy.

"'Oo!" murmured the crowd, aghast at the waste.

The constable was writing in his book. I think he was taking down the evidence of the confectioner to use against the corpse. It seemed time to wake up.

"Where is my wife?" I murmured.

"'E wants 'is old woman," cried the small boy, who ~~was~~ clearly in charge of the whole proceedings.

"The wife!" shouted the constable in official tones, and several people took up the cry, so that the whole of Bristol seemed to be ringing with shouts of "The Wife!" "The Wife!" "The Wife!"

"You want me?" said the calm voice of my dear Muriel.

"If you please, ma'am. What would you like done with yer 'usband?"

"What do you suggest?" asked Muriel.

"Well, ma'am, there's the infirmary or there's an hotel—both very good. But I must know where you're stoppin' because of course all this glass and cake will have to be paid for."

"I've settled that," said Muriel.

I was so surprised that I sat up, whereupon the small boy gave a loud exclamation right in my ear. "Laz'rus," he said to his sister.

"Hullo, old thing," greeted Muriel. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I answered, "but I don't think I'll drive the rest of the way down the hill, if you don't mind."

"Don't worry about that. The 'Fast Lady' has gone to a garage to have the side-brake mended. You were perfectly right in saying she wouldn't go up, so I owe you a lunch."

Somebody got a taxi, and we drove to the hotel, where I caused myself to be thoroughly examined. The doctor found nothing broken, but said the shock to the nervous system must have been severe, and for some time to come I must not be allowed even to smell chocolate.

We stayed at Bristol that night, waiting for the side-brake to be reattached. From what I could hear of the hills in Devonshire and Cornwall, I was likely to need it.

After dinner that evening, whilst dear Muriel was writing picture post cards to everybody she had ever known, I dropped into conversation with a very nice gentleman in the lounge. He had evidently heard of my accident—in fact there was an account of it in both the local evening papers, together with a photograph of the window as I left it—and was kind enough to ask me how I did. I said that I was much better until the waiter served me a chocolate *soufflé* at dinner whereupon I had slightly fainted.

The nice gentleman nodded in sympathy, and inquired which direction we were taking when we left Bristol.

"We are bound for Land's End," I told him, "by way of Barnstaple."

He looked at me rather peculiarly.

"By way of Barnstaple? You are going from here to Barnstaple, sir?"

Not liking his expression, the lowering of his tone, and the way he had glanced over his shoulder at Muriel in the corner, I asked if there was any objection to that route.

"N-no," he replied, doubtfully. "N-no. Are you taking the upper road or the lower?"

"The lower," I answered. "I have been advised to avoid the Minehead and Lynton way, my brakes and my engine not being quite all they should be."

"Quite," said the nice gentleman. "Oh, quite, quite, quite. You couldn't for a moment consider Minehead and Lynton. For you, sir, with your car, if I may say so, certain death." Here he lowered his tone almost to a whisper. "Certain death," he repeated. "One in four, my dear sir. One in four."

"You mean that one person out of every four is killed?"

"I mean that the gradient is one in four. The trouble is— However, what's the use of talking about that? It's one way or the other. I say, it's one way or the other."

"There are some bad hills the other way, perhaps?"

"No; no; no. I wasn't thinking of hills.

I was thinking"—another stealthy glance at Muriel—"I was thinking, sir, of the road between Bampton and South Molton."

"Is it very bad?" I whispered, wondering a little why Muriel might not hear about surfaces.

"Bad? My dear sir, it's the worst stretch of road in England! Vile! Filthy! Shake you to bits in that little thing of yours! But even that isn't the point." He beckoned me with his finger to lean nearer. "*I was thinking of the danger!*"

"Danger, sir? What sort of danger?"

The nice gentleman, to my surprise, leaned back in his chair, placed the tips of his fingers carefully together, and burst into melody. Muriel had risen from her table in the corner, and was coming towards us. He had seen her in the mirror at the end of the room.

"I'm going up now," said Muriel.

The nice gentleman sprang from his chair, and I did the same.

"Are you, darling? Very well. I shan't be long."

The nice gentleman bowed low. Muriel bowed slightly. She then went out, and we resumed our seats.

"A pity!" breathed the nice gentleman. "A great pity."

"About the road to South Molton, sir?"

"Yes. I hate to think of any harm coming to that charming young lady. However, what must be, must be."

"I should really be very much obliged if you would tell me what must be—or what might be. You spoke of danger. Do you mean danger from

human beings, or wild animals, or what? Pray, sir, speak out!"

"Very well," agreed the nice gentleman. "I will. Have you ever heard of the Doones?"

"I can't say I have."

"What? An educated man like you never heard of the Doones of Badgery?"

"I've read 'Lorna Doone,' of course."

"Very well, then. Those are the Doones I mean—the Doones of Badgery—spelt Bagworthy. Going from Bampton to South Molton, my good sir, you will pass through one of their favourite hunting-grounds."

"How very interesting!" I commented.

"Interesting? Yes, you'll find it interesting, I promise you, if the Doones are about!"

I smiled indulgently. The nice gentleman evidently harboured a few titmice in his organ loft.

"You smile!" he cried. "You think I am romancing! Wait till you find yourself on that lonely stretch of road. Fifteen miles, sir, of the loneliest road in England! I have been in the Fells of Cumberland, and that district is pretty lonely of a night, but nothing to be compared with the road to South Molton—the Doone road, as they call it about here. Now you are listening. *The Doones left descendants*. They work more secretly, but they are just as ruthless. Many an honest Bampton tradesman has never arrived at his home! There is more than one wife in South Molton who looks in vain, night after night, for the coming of her goodman. And, if the road is deserted by day, as it is, imagine the dreariness of it by night! Let me advise you, young man,

if you value your own life and the life of that young lady whom the fates have entrusted to your care, to make that journey in broad daylight, and to be very sure that your tyres and your engine are in perfect order, and your tank well filled with petrol. It may easily be that you will have to drive for your lives. Will you take anything? "

" Just our usual luggage," I said

" At this moment, I meant. Will you take any refreshment? "

He pressed the bell and a waiter appeared. How comfortable it all seemed—this pleasant room looking over the College Green, the lighted windows, the uniformed porter, the waiter with his little tray, the nice gentleman with his cosy face. If only—— But no! Muriel would never forgive me if I shirked the journey because of the Doones. She had often told me how she longed to have lived in the days of Dick Turpin and Claude Duval! That's all very well for girls. Highwaymen only *danced* with them!

" Thank you," I said. " I'll have a nice glass of port."

" A glass of port for the gentleman, waiter, and bring me a large whisky and a small soda. Now I'll tell you of a case that came within my own knowledge, and I am a native of these parts. It was Christmas Eve——"

There was no help for it. I had accepted his hospitality and I must listen to his stories. And listen to them I did until my heart, as the Psalmist so beautifully says, was like wax, my strength was dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue clove to my jaws. I know exactly how the poor fellow

felt. He was not a motorist, but he had been over some nasty country in his time.

Next morning—I went to the garage where the car was being renovated, and found the side-brake in position once more. I asked the mechanic if he knew the road from Bampton to South Molton, and he looked at me as though I were due for execution.

" You going there ? " he inquired mournfully.

" Certainly," I said.

" Then Gawd 'elp yer. That'll be fourteen and six."

I slipped into a gunsmith's shop on the way back to the hotel, and tried to buy a pistol and some ammunition, but the regulations were so numerous and costly—like our wedding presents—that I had to abandon the effort. Well, there it was! If we were both killed, it would be a stain on the escutcheon of the Home Secretary for ever and ever.

I said nothing, of course, to Muriel of all this. She told me I had been talking in my sleep about Doones and potsherd, but I laughed it off and we started.

I may tell you it was my intention to stop the night at Taunton, and thus get to Bampton at an early hour the following morning, with heaps of daylight in hand for the fateful journey. But, though I drove slowly, it was only four o'clock when we reached Taunton, and Muriel absolutely declined to stay there the night.

" Why ? " she demanded. " Why stay here when we can easily get on to Barnstaple ? "

I told her that Taunton was a most interesting

old town, with a church tower 150 feet high and an ancient leper-house. I pointed out that it was once occupied by Perkin Warbeck, and was the scene of Jeffreys's "Bloody Assize." Muriel was quite unmoved. In fact, she went so far as to say that Jeffreys was perfectly right.

So we had tea, which delayed us another hour, and left for Bampton at five o'clock. We got to Bampton about half-past six, and were through it before I realised we were there. Not a nut went wrong ; it wouldn't.

If I remember rightly, you turn sharp right in the middle of Bampton and climb a hill. You are then on a sort of plateau, and this plateau extends all the way to South Molton.

The nice gentleman was perfectly right about the dreariness of the road. I cannot conceive anything more lonely. Not a house, not a cottage, not a barn. Not a human being or even an animal. Just a desolate country-side, and fifteen miles of it at that !

I tried to drive rapidly, but the road was so bad that I could hardly hold the wheel, and dear Muriel's teeth chattered as though she had been suddenly smitten with the ague. I felt like poor Shackleton going over hummocks in his motor ice-plough. I can only suppose that they keep the road in that condition as a specimen of how bad a bad road really can be. I am told that people come from all parts of the world to look at it.

"D-d-d-don't d-d-d-d-drive s-s-o f-f-f-f-fast !" said Muriel.

"I'm n-n-n-n-not d-d-d-driving f-f-f-f-f-fast !" I replied.

"How f-f-f-f-fast are y-y-you d-d-d-d-driving?"

"F-f-f-f-five m-m-m-m-miles an h-h-h-hour!"

"G-g-g-g-good g-g-g-g-gracious!"

That is a fair sample of our conversation on the road between Bampton and South Molton. Fifteen miles at five miles an hour means three hours, so we could not expect to reach South Molton till half-past nine, and then it was another dozen miles or so to Barnstaple.

The sun was rapidly disappearing. It is extraordinary how slowly the sun comes up, and how quickly it goes down. There ought to be a nice hymn about that. I think when I get home—if we ever do get home—I shall try to write it.

At eight o'clock we had done about half this miserable piece of road. At eight-thirty we had still five miles of it to do. Before that time it would be nearly dark, and I presumed that the descendants of the Doones were even now priming their pistols and sharpening their knives.

"W-w-w-w-why d-d-d-d-do you k-k-k-k-keep l-l-l-l-looking over your sh-sh-sh-shoulder?" chattered Muriel.

"D-d-d-do I?" I said.

The fact was I could not help scanning the horizon for the silhouettes of men on horseback. Should they appear, come what might, I was determined to double our speed and make it ten miles an hour. Just to be ready, I did accelerate, and one of the lamps flew right off the bracket and into the road. Instinctively I pulled up, and that stopped the engine.

"Now you've done it," said Muriel glumly.

"I don't think so," I reassured her. "She's nice and warm. I'll just run back and get the lamp."

It was hardly worth recovering, as it turned out, for the glass was smashed and we had run over the other part. However, I picked it up and flung it into the car, quite forgetting the oil, which splashed on to Muriel's shoes and made her very cross. Heaven knows, there was every excuse, for the poor girl was tired and cold, and wanted her dinner.

I was tired and wanted my dinner, but cold I was not, for the Flick refused to start and I had a weary time at the handle. Have you ever noticed that when you are very much out of breath the least thing will cause you to lose your temper? I am sorry to say I lost mine on this occasion, and spoke to my dear wife as I never should have done without great provocation, and hope never to do again.

I had just completed the seventeenth twizzle, and was straightening up to get my breath and ease my back, when Muriel, who was sitting in the car watching me, said :

"What a tin-pot car ! "

I was furious ! After all, I am proud of my little Flick. It may not be a Rolls-Royce—I never made any such claim for it—but, at any rate, it had put up with a great deal since we left London. It is not every car that will go downhill backwards into a plate-glass window and look none the worse for it.

I left the handle, walked round to Muriel, and stared her very hard in the eye.

" What did you say ? " I inquired with ominous calm.

" I said it was a tin-pot car, and so it is. Are we going to be here all night ? "

" My dear girl," I retorted, " I am very much hurt. I think your remark about the ' Fast Lady ' quite uncalled for, and if you don't like riding in her you can get out and walk ! "

The result of this cruel and bitter speech makes my blood run cold even to think of !

" Very well," exclaimed Muriel. " I will."

She got out of the car and started off along the road to South Molton through the gathering gloom !

" Muriel ! " I called. " Come back, Muriel ! I beg your pardon ! I was in error ! Please come back ! "

She kept straight on. What was I to do ? She knew nothing of the descendants of the Doones. It was out of the question to let her walk all the way to South Molton alone !

On the other hand, how could I leave the car in the road with all our luggage ? I was torn between Muriel and the Flick ! I was distracted !

And then I made up my mind. She was more to me than any suit-case. She was my wife—my bride ! I abandoned the car and ran after her down the road. Hearing me running, she began to run, and so we raced along towards South Molton as a much greater pace than we had travelled in the car.

The town was nearer than I thought, as it happened, for we reached it in about ten minutes. Muriel flung herself to the ground just outside the first cottage, and her shoulders heaved.

"Forgive me!" I murmured, stooping over her tenderly.

She answered with a tremendous yell. She was *convulsed with laughter!*

(A taxi-driver went to fetch the Flick His name was Doone!)

CHAPTER XII

WE ENCOUNTER A STRANGE PERSON

WE found quite a budget of letters awaiting us at Barnstaple. It is always nice to have letters, and I opened mine with great interest whilst we were awaiting our supper. (An odd thing, but we never seem to arrive anywhere in time for dinner.)

The first was from Milton & Poppett's Garage, and was really a bill for all sorts of items which I had forgotten. In this bill, various parts of the Flick were referred to which I did not even know she possessed, such as the "sump," and the "dash-pot cover," and the "throttle spindle lever," and the "ignition cross rod bracket," and the "plug for elbow."

I really thrilled with pride to hear I was the owner of all these things, invisible though they might be. I don't think motorists reflect sufficiently, as they sail along the road, on all the good and loyal work being put in by the throttle spindle lever and the ignition cross rod bracket. But I shall, in future. What is more, if I knew where they were, I would photograph them for my album.

With the account was a short note from Ted, wishing me well and advising me to be careful what sort of people I allowed to look at the car.

WE ENCOUNTER A STRANGE PERSON 171

"You won't find not one man in ten," he wrote, "as knows a Flick when he meets one, so be careful what stuff they put over and don't buy it."

This puzzled me a good deal, because he had already told me what petrol and oil to ask for. However, his next sentence quite drove all that out of my head.

"I might be coming yore way meself," he added, "so look out for me anyware within a hundred miles of Dorchester, ware I got a ant—yores respectfully, Ted."

This was great news, and would lend additional zest to our trip.

I also heard from my employers, graciously according me an extra week's holiday in recognition of my wedding. My eyes filled with tears as I bent over my plate of cold beef. The world seemed to have formed a conspiracy of kindness.

Muriel had several letters, but she said they were mostly rot. As one was from her father, and contained a cheque, I was rather surprised at the dear girl's coldness.

However, we had great fun looking about Barnstaple the next morning. The chief feature of Barnstaple, I suppose, is the bridge. This bridge has no less than sixteen arches, and is said to date from the twelfth century. The people of Barnstaple are naturally very proud of their bridge, and spend most of their spare time on it, either looking at passers-by or spitting into the water. In the evening, if fine, the bridge is quite crowded, but I ascertained that the structure is perfectly safe, although so ancient. The porter at the hotel, who is a Barnstaple man himself, talked to me for quite

a long time about the bridge. He said some people thought the bridge at Bideford was a finer bridge, but he couldn't see where that came in himself.

I asked him what would happen if all the people in Barnstaple took it into their heads to stand on the bridge at one and the same time. He said nothing would happen. In fact, he said, they often did.

Undoubtedly, a very fine bridge. I drew Muriel's attention to it whenever we looked out of the window, the hotel being built so as to command an unobstructed view of the bridge.

The Grammar School dates from the fourteenth century. I was told it would well repay a visit, but I regret to say we did not see it.

And now I must record a discovery I have made with regard to my dear wife. I shall say it in no sense of reproach—merely as a fact of some human interest.

She is restless. You may remember that she had no sooner arrived at Watford than she wanted to leave it, and also that she hurried me away from Bath the very day after I inadvertently indulged in a hot spring. We did not thoroughly explore Bristol, and nothing would induce her to spend a night at Taunton. And now, if you please, she had had quite enough of Barnstaple!

I hope this restlessness is not a characteristic of a post-war age, but I rather fancy it is. Naturally, I argued the point with her for her own good.

"My dear child," I said, as she lay in bed reading a novel when she might quite well have been admiring the bridge, "my dear child, does it occur to you that we may never visit Barnstaple again?"

"What a loss!" murmured Muriel.

"Well," I persevered, "I think it *would* be a loss if we left this ancient town without exploring it to the full. Why, we haven't even seen the church."

"Go and look at it," said Muriel. "Nobody's preventing you."

"But a pleasure shared, my dear, is a pleasure doubled. We ought to visit all these spots of interest together so that we may discuss them at home in the long winter evenings."

She laughed! She threw her book on the floor and laughed. For my part, being hurt and puzzled, I went out and took a photograph of the bridge. It was a source of regret that I only got in thirteen of the arches, but to get the whole sixteen into my picture I should have had to hire a boat, which seemed extravagant. Besides, breakfast was ready.

We did, however, go to Ilfracombe, because Muriel had another school-friend living there, named Daisy Motum. She said it would be great fun to give Daisy the surprise of her life and of course that appealed with equal force to me.

Before leaving for Ilfracombe, I asked the porter at the hotel, who by this time was a firm friend, if he could give me any information concerning it. The porter, a very helpful fellow indeed, went into the smoking-room and there found an illustrated booklet issued by the Great Western Railway, one of the four finest main lines in the kingdom.

From this booklet I discovered a great many fascinating and exciting details about Ilfracombe. For example :

" During the autumn months," it said, " the angler may, with the aid of stout hand-lines, hope to capture congers."

I read this out to the porter, and asked him what was to prevent the angler from *hoping* to catch congers whether he had stout hand-lines or not. The porter, who had just finished loading up the hotel omnibus with the luggage of an American party numbering ten in all, said he didn't know, but what *he* was hoping for was a glass of beer. Not wishing to encourage him in intemperance, I went on with the booklet.

Ilfracombe, you understand, was not on our way to Land's End, but as Muriel was quite sure Daisy Motum would be delighted to see us, we devoted a day to the side trip. I surreptitiously took the little Great Western booklet with me, the porter being off duty for a few minutes.

" Is Daisy Motum married ? " I inquired, as we slowly negotiated the first hill on the way to Ilfracombe.

" Of course," replied Muriel. " You don't suppose she'd have a name like that if she wasn't, do you ? When she was at school with me her name was Davis, or something ordinary of that sort. Then about three years ago I got a card announcing her wedding to a man called Motum, and they were going to live at Ilfracombe. I don't know anything else about them."

" Not, for example, where they live ? "

" My dear Leonard, as if I should remember all these years the actual address of the house ! I think it was very clever of me to remember that they lived at Ilfracombe."

WE ENCOUNTER A STRANGE PERSON 175

"So do I, my dear—very clever indeed. But—excuse my asking—how shall we find them?"

"From the *Post Office Directory*, of course. There won't be more than one person named Motum living in Ilfracombe."

"There may not be one," I murmured.

"What did you say? Don't mumble, Leonard."

"It's of no consequence, my darling."

You climb a long hill to get above Ilfracombe, and then descend an equally long one to get into the town. The main street is very narrow, and at the time of our arrival very crowded with a lot of people without hats. With the exception of our own, I don't think there was a single hat in the whole street.

Ilfracombe, you must know, is to the West of England wha^t Blackpool is to the North-West, and Scarborough to the North-East, and Margate to the South-East. In addition to the congers which you may hope to catch if you have the right tackle and are there at the right time of year, the main attractions are the Capstone Hill and the Tors, the former being 180 feet in height, and the latter 600 feet. Then, of course, there is the sea and the air and the sunshine.

The men in the street were all dressed in the same way—tennis-shirt open at the neck, flannel trousers, socks and canvas shoes. Most of them were peeling at the nose, which seemed to render them very happy. The ladies who hung on their arms were similarly dressed, skirts being substituted for trousers. They also, in many instances, were acquiring new skin on the face.

They all walked in the narrow roadway, so that

we progressed at the rate of one mile per hour. The congestion whilst I waited outside the Post Office for Muriel was extraordinary. They swirled about me like waves round a rock in the ocean. I hope no rock ever feels as self-conscious as I did.

"She's left here and gone to live at Combe Martin!" cried Muriel excitedly. "We're hot on the track! Come on! I know the way!"

Gradually we ploughed through the myriads of peeling holiday folk, and took the road to Combe Martin. This is a pretty little place, about four miles from Ilfracombe. Being slightly inland, the conger-fishing is practically nil.

We learnt that Mrs. Motum lived in a small house near the Wesleyan Chapel. We soon found it, and Muriel, quite lit up at the thought of the surprise she had for her friend, tripped up the little pathway and knocked at the door.

It was opened by a tall, dark, gaunt woman who looked about thirty-five, and mournful. She stared very hard at my wife, and seemed rather resentful, I thought, at the gay nature of her attire.

"Well, Daisy!" exclaimed Muriel. "Don't you know me?"

"I have not that pleasure," said Mrs. Motum.

"Don't you remember Hurst Lodge?"

"I was at school, a long time ago, at a place called Hurst Lodge."

"Oh, not so long ago," chirped Muriel. "Not more than six years."

"Time is not measured by years," pronounced Mrs. Motum in a hollow voice. "Who are you?"

"Well, I used to be Muriel Levendale, but I'm married now, and my name is Rabbidge."

"Muriel Levendale? Yes, I remember. A flighty, irreligious girl you were. But you say you are married. Your sins have found you out."

"I hope it won't be as bad as all that," laughed Muriel. "That's my funny little husband in the car."

"From what I can see of him, he looks very worldly. I can give you a cup of tea, if you wish it. Tell your husband, who probably drinks, that I have no beer, wine or spirit. If he cares for a cup of tea, he is welcome."

She disappeared into the cottage, and Muriel came to fetch me.

"She's dotty," whispered my wife. "She always was a bit queer, and being married has sent her clean off the deep end."

"I think I'll stay here," I suggested.

"Not on your life, my boy. Out with you and come and protect your wife."

As we crept up the path, I asked: "What do you think is her special form of mania!"

"Sex-hatred and religion," whispered Muriel.

"We shall have a jolly time of it."

Mrs. Motum appeared to live all alone, which was not surprising. There were no signs of Mr. Motum about the house.

"He's clearly hopped it," said Muriel.

"Do you think she's dangerous?"

"She may poison the tea."

"Not yours. She only hates men. She'll poison mine." And I secretly determined not to drink a drop of it.

Mrs. Motum carried in the teapot as though it contained the ashes of Mr. Motum. Perhaps she had done him in!

"My husband," said Muriel.

I bowed. Mrs. Motum glared at me with a hostile eye.

"ARE YOU SAVED?" she suddenly thundered.

"I beg your pardon?" countered I.

"Are you saved, Mr. Rabbidge?"

"Well—er—I hope so."

"Most men are quite indifferent on the subject. My husband, Mr. Motum, was one of them."

"I hope he is well," ventured Muriel very boldly.

"He may be. Or he may be dead. I know not. He passed out of my life two years ago. I do not regret him. Milk? Or sugar? Or both?"

Muriel took both. I took neither. If she poisoned me with pure tea, she herself, at any rate, would perish with me.

"A pretty little place, Combe Martin," said I.

"Is it?" Mrs. Motum shrugged her shoulders. "I have no eye for the beauties of this earth. Combe Martin or Halifax, it makes little difference to me. I expect no pleasure in this life, and ask for none. Three years ago I was a young girl, full of life and hope. I married an insurance agent, one of the greatest rascals on the face of the earth. Why did he marry me?" (This was just what I was wondering.) "In order to make me miserable. He drank beer, he swore, he betted on horses, he went fishing on Sundays."

"Congers!" I exclaimed helpfully.

"Congers or eels," raved Mrs. Motum, "what difference did it make to me? I was disgraced in the eyes of the congregation of the chapel. They actually prayed for him, by name, in my presence. That was a nice thing, for a bride, to have her

husband, a man in perfect health, prayed for in the chapel ! When he came back from his ungodly sport, laden with his ungodly spoils, I threw the fish down the well ! That night he left me, and has never returned. More tea, Mrs. Rabbidge ? ”

“ Thank you very much,” said Muriel, “ but I think we ought to be getting back to Barnstaple. I’m so pleased to have met you again, Daisy.”

“ Wait ! ” Mrs. Motum rose to her full height. “ How long have you been married, Muriel Rabbidge ? ”

“ Just a week, Daisy. Why ? ”

“ A week ! You are on what is called a honeymoon ! A mocking-moon ! What do you know of this man to whom you have entrusted your life ? Nothing. What do you know of his past ? Nothing. What do you know of his habits ? Nothing. What do you know of his vices ? Nothing. And yet you look forward confidently to a life of happiness ! O blind, blind, blind ! If I had my way, there should be no more marrying or giving in marriage ! The male race should be wiped out, exterminated ! They cumber the earth ! There is not one of ‘hem fit to draw breath in the presence of any woman ! They give us the vote, and expect us to go down on our knees and thank them for their generosity ! The vote, forsooth ! Do you think I would enter a polling booth designed and erected by Man ? Never ! Until we have *deprived them* of the vote, until Woman is the dominating creature, there is not the slightest vestige of a hope of happiness for this poor land !

“ Mr. Rabbidge, you may return to your carriage ! ”

I rose with alacrity.

" Good-bye, Mrs. Motum," I said. " And thank you for a very pleasant visit. Are you ready, my dear ? "

" I wish your wife to remain behind a moment."

" Oh, but——" I protested.

" Trot along," said Muriel. " I shan't be a second."

So I trotted, and sat waiting in the Flick, feeling very humble and very wicked.

A few minutes later, Muriel came out, unaccompanied. I raised my hat to the silent cottage, and away we drove.

" A penny for your thoughts," said Muriel.

" I was wondering, my dear, if you had an old school friend at Penzance, or Land's End, or Falmouth, or Lyme Regis, or Bournemouth ? "

" Well ? And what if I have ? "

" Oh, nothing, my dear. I shall look forward to making their acquaintance."

" Leonard," observed Muriel, a mile farther on, " do you know what happened after you went out ? "

" Did she cry ? "

" Cry ? Heavens, no ! She was enjoying herself far too much for that. We prayed for you, old son ! At least, she did."

" I hope I shall benefit by it," I replied sincerely.

" I hope you will, old sport. In the meantime, you're going to benefit by a bottle of champagne with your dinner."

" A bottle of champagne, Muriel ? Why ? "

" Because I think you've earned it."

" My darling ! "

“Look out! Mind that cyclist!”

That night, after dinner, Muriel said she would like to see the bridge by moonlight. I was naturally very pleased, and showed it to her from various angles. She agreed with me that it really was a very fine bridge, and confessed that she had not previously appreciated it to the full.

We then went on to talk about things in general, and had a very important conversation about my character. Muriel said that Mrs. Motum was undoubtedly batty, but, at the same time, there was a lot of truth in what she said about men.

“I’m not a man-hater,” declared my wife; “far from it. On the whole, I think they’re about as good as women and sometimes a bit better. But there are lots and lots of rotters knocking about, old stick, and’ if you don’t stand up to them they’ll do you down. You’re a very decent little sort, Leonard; a bit too decent, if anything. You want more guts, old plum. The more you stand up for your rights, the more I shall think of you. I was furious about all those eggs you made them give you at the hotel in London, but you were dead right, and I’ve often chuckled about it since. And that fellow Lindsay Mountford—he’s a rotten egg, you know, although rather an amusing rotter, I admit. When we get back, don’t you stand any sauce from Master Lindsay. You’ll be surprised how he’ll knuckle under if you take a firm line with him.

“The same with all these hotel people. Here and there you find a good hotel, but most of ’em will skin you alive if you let ’em. I’m astonished what people put up with without grumbling. They

pay their bills and sneak out without a word, as if they'd committed some crime in a corridor and wanted to get away before it's found out. . . .

" I seem to be talking rather a lot. P'r'aps it's the fizz. We'd better go to bed."

Now, I have recorded that conversation very carefully because it had surprising results, as you will see. It also showed me what an influence a wife can make on her husband's character.

" You seem very restless," said Muriel about an hour later. " What's the matter ? "

" I was wondering about something."

" Wondering about what ? "

" Oh, nothing. I was only wondering—if I *was* saved."

" Silly little old duffer," she murmured. " *I'll* save you."

Astounding ! Almost maternal ! And yet not. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

A RECORD IN MOTORING ANNALS

WHEN I awoke next morning—which was *this* morning, if you follow me—the first thing I thought of was my dear Muriel's advice of last night.

"You want more guts, old plum. The more you stand up for your rights, the more I shall think of you."

It had a sort of exhilarating effect. It stimulated me to such an extent that I could hardly shave. I wanted to get downstairs and stand up for my rights.

I splashed about like anything in the bath-room, and sang :

*"O, my name it is little Jock Elliott ;
Who dare meddle wi' me ?"*

just to show them the sort of man they had to deal with. Those were the only two lines I knew, having heard the song at a concert in Dulwich, but I repeated them a great number of times before I was dry.

The porter was the only person about.

"Good morning, porter !" I said aggressively.

"Good morning, sir," replied the porter, touching his cap. (No opening as yet.)

"We are leaving this morning," I announced. (Now this was frightfully bold, because when people are leaving they generally keep it a secret from everybody in the hotel until the last possible moment. And yet, somehow or another, all the staff know it as well as if one were labelled.)

"Are you, sir?" answered the porter pleasantly. "And where are you bound for?"

"Land's End," I said shortly, meaning that he could put that in his pipe and smoke it.

"Oh, indeed, sir? An interesting place, I believe. Never been that far myself. Excuse me one moment, sir."

Nothing doing! What next? The garage! That was the place!

I hurried round there with flashing eyes and shoulders well braced back. A man was at work on my car.

"Hallo!" I cried. "What are you doing to that car?"

"Just giving the greasers a turn, sir, and I've filled the radiator. Would you care for any petrol?"

"Fill the tank," I commanded.

"Very good, sir. She'll be quite ready for you when you wish to start."

Another blank! But I had a splendid idea! The bill!

I dashed back to the hotel, strode up to the office, and said sharply:

"We are leaving this morning. Kindly make out my bill, please."

"Madame has paid it," said the lady at the desk.

"Paid it?" I stammered.

" Yes, sir. She rang for it just as you went out, and paid it at once. I've sent up the receipt. Lovely morning, is it not ? "

I had to admit it. But somebody, surely, would cross me before long.

When Muriel came down to breakfast I asked her why she had paid the bill.

" Because what with shop windows, which was my fault, and side-trips to see my friends, I thought you might be running a bit short. I had a cheque from daddy yesterday."

" You- er—it's very good of you, of course, but- er——"

" Oh, get on with your bun ! " said Muriel.

Clearly, the new method was not to be applied to herself.

We left the best of friends with everybody. But my chance was coming sooner than I expected.

Our plan was to see Clovelly, which lies a little off the main road to Penzance, and then get on as far as we could before nightfall, taking our chance of a good inn or hotel.

You can't drive into Clovelly. The cliff descends so sharply that the road ends high above the village, and the only way down is on foot. When you get to the end of the road, a notice-board tells you to put your car in a sort of farmyard at the back and pay sixpence. However, as we were only staying a few minutes I did not see the point of that, but drew the " Fast Lady " well out of the way of any other traffic there might be, and proceeded to instruct Muriel, briefly, about this lovely spot which neither of us had ever seen.

" Clovelly," I said, " is a quaint Devonshire

village standing on a cliff four hundred feet high. It is not generally known that Charles Dickens——"

"Oy!" said an ominous voice behind me.

Turning, I beheld the owner of the voice. He was a large, stout, determined-looking man.

"You can't stand your car there," he explained, pointing to the notice.

This was my chance. The blood danced in my veins! I was feeling as healthy as healthy.

"Indeed!" I answered. "And why not?"

"Because it's against orders! Can't you read?" And again he pointed to the notice.

"I can read when I choose," I told him, "but I am not compelled to read every notice people put up on the King's highway."

"This ain't the King's highway. This is private property. You can't stand your car there. Nobody ain't allowed to stand no car on this road. You must put it in the yard and pay sixpence."

"And what if I refuse?"

"Then you'll 'ave to move on."

"But I can't move on. The road ends here."

"Move back, then, to where you come from. It makes no odds to me."

"I shall move back in the direction from whence I came when this lady has seen the village of Clovelly. As I was saying, my dear, it is not generally known that Charles Dickens——"

"Oy!" came again. "I told you as you can't stand your car there. You must put it in the yard and pay sixpence."

I stood up in the Flick. Muriel tried to restrain me, but I was eager to earn her regard.

"Now, look here, my man," I said loudly, "let

me tell you something. If you go on in this unpleasant manner, people will leave off coming to Clovelly at all, and where will you all be then? Why, you might even have to work!" (A nasty one, I think.)

"They'll come all right," answered the man.

"What's the good of making a fuss?" whispered Muriel. "Put the car in the yard and give him his rotten sixpence and let's see the blessed village and get away. If it comes to that, I don't care a hoot whether I see it or not!"

"But I do, my dear. I have brought you all this way to show you the beauty spots of Devon and Cornwall, and I am determined that you shall see Clovelly."

"All right," she decided, suddenly jumping out. "I'll go and see it while you mind the car, and then when I come back you can go and see it."

She was down the path and out of sight in a twinkling. As for Cerberus, he kept watching the road by which we had come as though expecting somebody. For my part, I simply sat in the Flick and admired the view.

"There'll be a policeman along directly," he muttered at last.

"Good," I rejoined. "He may know something about the law of the road."

"He knows all about it. 'E'll soon tell you as you can't stop there."

"Right. . . . You don't seem to be doing much business this morning."

"We do all the business we want."

"You're easily satisfied. They tell me Clovelly is not the place it was."

He looked uneasy. " What's the matter with it ? "

" Too many rules," I fired out.

He made no reply to that, but strolled up the road a few yards to look for the policeman, Just as he was returning, disappointed, Muriel came back up the path.

" Well ! " I said.

" Rotten," was her comment.

" Not worth seeing ? "

" I don't think you need worry."

So I drove off without seeing Clovelly, which was a pity in a way, but I had asserted my right as a motorist to remain in the road. We met the policeman just round the corner, and he touched his helmet in a very civil manner.

" What was the village really like ? " I asked my wife.

" Lovely ! " she exclaimed.

I sang a short song.

And now, although we did not know it, we were approaching one of the most remarkable adventures that have yet happened to us, and, indeed, I should imagine, one of the most remarkable things that ever happened to any motorist in the world.

I have already mentioned that it was a lovely day. Well, it went on being lovely--I mean, so far as the weather was concerned. The sun grew hotter and hotter, and as we proceeded we got whiffs of honeysuckle, and dog-roses, and hay, and all sorts of refreshing things we don't smell much in Camberwell.

Fortunately, we had brought our lunch along with us from the hotel, and the next thing was to

find a nice secluded spot off the main road where we could enjoy it in private. After lunch I proposed to read to my dear Muriel some charming passages, from another little railway booklet, about the vegetation at the Lizard.

After a good deal of searching, we found the ideal spot—between Bude and Wadebridge. It was a narrow lane that turned off the main road on our left, and ran up on to a beautiful moor. I did not take the car all the way up the lane, but just far enough to be hidden from the main road.

We then partook of an admirable luncheon which consisted of egg-sandwiches, buns, and ginger-beer. No sooner was this repast despatched than I produced the little guide-book and read as follows :

“ Each promontory, indeed the whole Cornish littoral, owes much of its charms to the vegetation it supports, to the lichens which dapple the rock, the samphire of the dizzy ledge, the spleenwort which festoons the roofs of the caves, the osmunda that graces many a wet shelf and dripping slope, the vernal squill whose sky-blue corymbs stud miles of turf along the edge of the precipice, the sea-pink that decks the tragic brow of the northern strand, the delicate harebell, the bugloss——”

“ The what ? ” asked Muriel.

“ The bugloss, my darling.”

“ Must be a misprint.”

“ Oh, no ! I know all about the bugloss ! A name of Greek origin. It comes from *bous*, an ox, and *glossa*, the tongue. In other words, ox-tongue.”

“ I thought ox-tongue was stuff they put in tins.”

I laughed merrily.

"That's real ox-tongue, my dear. The bugloss is so called because it *resembles* the tongue of an ox."

"Disgusting," said Muriel.

"Let me see. Where was I? Oh, yes, here we are!—'the bugloss, the valerian—Padstow's Pride—and, not least, that modest sisterhood of flowers, the thyme, the milkwort and the cinquefoil, whose tiny blossoms star the rarely-trodden sward. Here and there at the cliff's foot——'"

"Is there much more of this?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, yes, darling! Don't you think it's very beautiful?"

"Too beautiful for a mere worm like me. By the way, Leonard, I thought you were so great on butterflies."

"I wouldn't say 'great,' my dear. I am a member, as you know, of the Camberwell Entomological Society, and my collection is not to be despised, they tell me."

"Do you know all the butterflies by their names?"

"Well, all the common English varieties, at any rate."

"What's that one?" She pointed heavenwards with a banana.

"That? That's the Camberwell Beauty."

"Rather smart on the spur of the moment."

"But I'm not joking, my dear. The Camberwell Beauty belongs to the *genus Vanessa*, which, in its turn, belongs to the family Nymphalidæ. You can always tell this particular family because the club of the antennæ is short and bold, and the eyes extremely hairy."

"I never heard of hairy eyes," murmured Muriel sleepily.

A RECORD IN MOTORING ANNALS 191

"Oh, yes, my dear! All the Nymphalidæ family have hairy eyes."

"How beastly," droned Muriel.

"In addition to the Camberwell Beauty," I continued, warming to a subject in which I was really at home, "you get the *Vanessa Polychloros*, commonly known as the great tortoise-shell, and the *Vanessa Urticæ*, or common tortoise-shell, and the *Vanessa Atalanta*, or red admiral, and the *Vanessa Cardui*, known as the painted lady, and, lastly, the *Vanessa Io*, or peacock, which has eyes in its wings."

"I don't believe it," said Muriel firmly. "I never saw a butterfly with eyes in its wings."

"But it is so, my dear, I assure you."

"Hairy eyes, I suppose?"

"Well, that would depend."

"Depend on what?"

"Well—er—on the age of the butterfly."

"Funny, aren't you?"

"I had no intention of being funny, my dear."

"Well, now, I'll make you a sporting offer. You get your net out of the car, and catch a butterfly with hairy eyes in its wings, and I'll stand you dinner wherever we stop to-night."

"All right! Agreed! But what will you do in the meantime?"

"Oh, I'll stop here and look after the car."

"You're sure you'll be quite safe?"

"Safer than in it," muttered Muriel, rather ungratefully. Yet she spoke more truly than she knew.

In point of fact, I had been longing for just such a chance, this part of the world boasting many a

specimen that I could never hope to obtain in the neighbourhood of Camberwell.

So I quickly got my net, left my coat in the Flick, and hurried up to the summit of the moor. It was very hot up there, but very glorious, and I was soon in full chase after a *Vanessa Cardui*.

She seemed to enjoy the fun as much as I did, settling coyly for a moment to give me time to catch up, and then away again on her beautiful painted wings, fluttering exquisitely against the great expanse of blue sky. Ah, the joys of the chase ! Let others hunt their stags and their foxes and their hares and their stoats and their weasels ! For me, the Painted Lady on a fine summer afternoon is all I ask in the way of sport !

On, on, pretty one ! Leonard is coming !

I should think we must have had a run of at least four miles without a check, It was one of the best I ever remember. My *Vanessa Cardui* was a gallant insect and died game. Just for a moment after I. had incarcerated her in the lethal bottle she continued to flutter those glorious wings ; then she folded them quietly about her, and all was peace.

There is no triumph like a perfect finish to the end of a run like that. I shall certainly send a description of my run, together with a photograph of my capture, to the *Entomological Journal*. Not even every Vice-President can boast such an experience.

It now behoved me to find my way back to the Flick and dear Muriel. I had, of course, taken my bearings by the sun, as all thoroughly experienced entomologists do. It is only the foolish schoolboy

A RECORD IN MOTORING ANNALS 193

or an occasional bishop, who runs so far that he gets lost and is never heard of again.

I was perspiring very freely, but the afternoon was still hot, and soon there would be that solace for all good huntsmen, tea. I swung along, therefore, singing happily the entomologists' hunting song :

*" Fly, Red Admiral, fly in the sky !
Fly ! Fly ! Fly ! "*

A rollicking affair. I hoped that Muriel would hear me as I came, and run to greet me, proud to honour the hero of the chase.

But she did not. No matter ! Here was the little steep lane by which I had climbed, and just round the corner were my wife and my vehicle. . .

They were not.

There was no Muriel. There was no car.

The lane was empty ! . . .

I was staggered. I was nonplussed. For several moments I refused to believe the evidence of my eyes. Yet I had to believe it.

Naturally, I concluded the worst. Some ruffian had stolen upon the dear girl as she dozed, administered an anæsthetic, flung her into the car, and driven away !

It was my fault—all my selfish fault. In my eagerness to catch the *Vanessa Cardui*, in my foolish vanity to display the spoils of the chase to my adoring one, I had run too far, and left her to the mercy of the villains who haunt the high road !

I rushed down the lane and looked this way and that. Not a sign. The world lay peaceful and deserted in the afternoon sunshine. I went back to

the place where I had left her, just to make sure of the spot. Yes, there lay the banana-skin the dear girl had flung aside after lunch. I picked it up, and placed it reverently in a trouser-pocket—having no coat.

Then I sat down and wept. Picture a strong man weeping, with a killing-bottle containing a dead *Vanessa Cardui* in one pocket, and an empty banana-skin in the other. . . .

And now a miracle happened. Quite suddenly, as I sat there and sobbed, came the sound of the voice I loved best in all the world—the voice of my dear Muriel !

" Hallo, old plum ! " it said.

I started up, hurried towards her, and clasped her in my arms.

" You're awfully hot," she observed. " Where's the car ? "

" Never mind about the car ! I have you ! "

" I think you'll require both, my boy, if you want to get anywhere civilised to-night. What have you done with her ? "

" Nothing. I came back here and you had both disappeared."

" But she was here when I woke up and went for a stroll to meet you ! "

" How long ago ? "

" Oh, about ten minutes."

" Then she has been stolen in the meantime ! "

" Impossible ! I should have heard the engine if anyone had started it ! You know what that engine is ! "

There was a cottage near by. I raced to it, and asked it if it had seen any suspicious person about.

A RECORD IN MOTORING ANNALS 195

An old woman feeding chickens said a few cars had passed along the road, but none had stopped. She had seen no foot passengers.

I went back to Muriel, and found her examining the wheel-marks in the lane. Two sets of marks were clearly visible in the thick dust.

"Look here!" she cried. "These are the marks the 'Fast Lady' made coming into the lane, and this is the way she went out!"

"Excellent!" I said bitterly. "That establishes the fact that she was not caught up to heaven in an aeroplane!"

"The funny thing is," continued Muriel, "there are no foot-marks except our own!"

It was true. No human being had entered that lane but ourselves for many hours! Then how had the Flick——?

"Did you put the side-brake on very firmly!" asked Muriel.

"I suppose so. I can't remember putting it on at all."

"Then I know what's happened. She rolled down the lane backwards, crossed the main road, and has gone right on all down the side of the valley!"

Quick as thought, we dashed after her. The lane was one of those deep ones you get in Devonshire, with high banks and no ditches. The Flick would find herself in a sort of groove, and nothing would stop her unless— But we dared not think of that!

A little way down the far side of the lane a man was working in a field. I hailed him, and asked if he had seen anything of a small two-seater without a driver.

" There wuz zummat," he said, " as went a-rumblin' past 'ere 'bout ten minutes ago, but Oi never look to zee what 'er wuz."

It was enough! We flew on! The lane grew steeper and steeper!

Presently we came to a cottage. I cantered up the path and hammered at the door. A pleasant-faced young woman looked out from a window.

" Excuse me," I shouted, raising my hat, " but did you see anything of a small car travelling without control? "

" Yezzir," replied the woman.

" About ten minutes ago? "

" Yezzir."

" Going backwards? "

" Yezzir."

" Was she going fast? "

" Oh, yezzir! "

" How far is it to the next village? A mile? "

" Yezzir."

" Twó miles? "

" Yezzir."

" Oh, come on! " cried Muriel. " We shall never catch her! "

The next trace of the " Fast Lady " was a dead chicken in the roadway, squashed nearly flat, and beyond that lay a wheelbarrow, smashed to atoms.

We plodded on. The people in the fields looked up as we passed, and cheered us lustily, waving their rakes and forks. A dog joined in the chase, easily outstripping us, and constantly looking back with its tongue out, as though deriding our efforts.

The village at last! Half the inhabitants at their doors! A crowd in the market-place!

" 'Ere be 'um ! " they shouted, and made a gap in their ranks, through which we could see the dear little Flick, the local constable sitting proudly in my seat, holding the wheel like grim death !

" Is she hurt ? " I yelled.

" Noa, zur, 'er be zafe an' zound, 'er be ! "

" Thank heaven ! " We flung ourselves to the ground and panted.

It seems that the descent grows gradually less as it nears the village, so that the Flick entered, still backwards, at quite a moderate pace, swerved a little, and came to rest against the statue of Queen Victoria.

The policeman was very intelligent. In a couple of hours we had made him understand the whole occurrence, and five shillings rewarded him for leaping aboard the stationary runaway and sitting there till we came.

We pushed on to Newquay for the night, and Muriel honoured her wager with a very nice little dinner.

And so, having written up my journal, to bed.

CHAPTER XIV

DASTARDLY ATTACK ON THE "FAST LADY"

JULY 27.—Well, well, well! So much as I have to tell you! I only hope I shall remember it all, because it would be such a pity to leave anything out! I ought, I know, to write up this journal every evening, but there is so much to talk about, and so much to plan, that it is almost impossible to get the necessary quiet hour or two. But I make rough notes when dear Muriel is writing her post cards, and I find them the greatest aid to memory.

You left us at Newquay, after that extraordinary career on the part of the Flick all by herself. She was none the worse for it, poor little thing, and of course, she had used no petrol at all, since the engine was not running. (Would it be running if she went down hill in neutral? I am not quite sure. Do these technical details matter, after all?)

We had a look at Newquay in the morning, and then left for Penzance.

They tell me that Newquay enjoys the Gulf Stream temperature. I am very glad to hear it, because I can't honestly say that I altogether enjoyed it myself. In fact, it was so hot that Muriel and I could hardly drag one foot after the other, but just sank on to a seat in the Trenance

Pleasure Gardens and gasped. The hall-porter at our hotel—a charming man—said he had never seen the Gulf Stream himself, but he understood it was there right enough. He further added that he wished it was a Beer Stream, but that seemed to me a little gross, so I left him.

We got to Penzance about six o'clock in the evening, and were told we were very lucky to get a room for the night. I remembered what dear Muriel had said about standing up for my rights, however, and was determined to have no nonsense at Penzance or elsewhere.

"I can't promise you a room after to-night," said the lady at the desk.

"And I can't promise you to stay more than one night," I hit back.

"There may be somebody leaving in the morning," she mused, pulling her underlip and studying the visitors' book.

"Yes," I told her. "Us."

She seemed to tire of the conversation at that, and threw to the porter the number of our room. It was quite a nice room, but I could not help asking the porter if we had *bought* the furniture, or whether we had just the use of it during our stay. The porter said they were wonderfully full. I replied that wonderful was the *mot juste*.

Feeling jaunty, I went down to dinner in my blazer. This is a rather nice garment—yellow and cerise stripes, with my initials in green on the pocket. It caused quite a stir in the dining-room, which was so crowded that several of the guests had to eat with their elbows out of the windows. Most of them, for all that, were in evening-dress.

We started off with some soup. After one taste of it I beckoned to the waiter, who flew to my side in less than a quarter of an hour.

" Is this soup supposed to be hot or cold ? " I asked him.

" Hot," replied the waiter, in lordly fashion.

" Well," I said, " just send it to Newquay and ask them to put it in the Gulf Stream for a few minutes."

This sally went very well with the people at the next table, and one of the ladies whispered to Muriel — their shoulders were firmly jammed together, so it wasn't difficult—that they had been there a fortnight and had tepid soup every night.

I asked the waiter for a *menu*, but he said they were all gone. However, he could tell me anything I wanted to know. (His lordly manner never relaxed, mind you. If it had been December instead of July, I suppose he would have waited upon us on his knees.)

" Splendid ! " I returned. " Was this fish caught locally, or did it swim round from Grimsby ? "

He walked off, and had a few bitter words with a colleague at the hatch.

There was a young man at a table near ours all alone. Well, when I say he was all alone, I mean that he did not belong to any party, and so had a very small table to himself. But he was not in any sense lonely, for a stout gentleman at the next table to that had his elbow in the young man's plate, and the young man could only eat with one hand for fear of banging the stout gentleman's wife under the chin.

What with the heat and the restraint, the young man presently grew peevish, and I heard a low altercation between him and my lordly waiter.

"What's this stuff?" asked the young man.

"Minced liver," replied the waiter.

"Take it away," ordered the young man.

"Don't you fancy it?" asked the waiter.

I won't quote the young man's reply. Shortly after that he turned very pale and left the room.

When we had finished I asked my waiter to bring two coffees.

"We serve coffee in the lounge," replied the waiter.

"A good notion," I reassured him. "But we'll have ours in here."

"No coffee is served in here," was the answer.

"Why not?"

"It's against the rules."

"I won't tell anybody."

But he brought no coffee, so I went for the head-waiter, who repeated that it was a firm rule of the hotel to serve no coffee in the dining-room.

"Where do people have breakfast?" I asked innocently.

"In here," said the head-waiter.

"Do they have coffee with their breakfast?"

"Oh, yes, coffee with breakfast."

"Then bring two breakfasts with coffee."

The head-waiter went out, and I believe they had a sort of Cabinet Meeting of the whole staff. They may even have telephoned to London for instructions--if, that is to say, their head-quarters were in London, which I doubt. I fancy it was an independent hotel in more senses than one.

The head-waiter came back presently and said it was against the rules to serve breakfast overnight. So we strolled into the lounge, which was full of people having coffee in the right place.

There was only one vacant seat—a sort of ottoman.

" Here we are, my darling," I told Muriel, waving her to the ottoman.

We sank down together, and the next moment we were *in* the ottoman, our legs alone sticking out. Then I knew why that inviting seat was vacant in the crowded lounge.

We were not seriously hurt, so I suggested a stroll as far as Newlyn, a small and picturesque fishing place to the south of Penzance, rendered famous by that exhilarating picture, " A Hopeless Dawn."

As we walked along I gave Muriel a good deal of information about Newlyn and " A Hopeless Dawn." I told her that Newlyn was a favourite spot with artists because of the crooked streets and unexpected corners and doorways. As for " A Hopeless Dawn," as far as I remembered that was a picture of a young woman who had been obviously sitting up all night waiting for the return of her husband, in all probability a fisherman. The point was that he would never return, and therefore it was a " hopeless dawn."

Muriel, who has her own way of looking at things, said that the picture might have been painted just as well in London as in Newlyn. She pointed out that sitting up all night waiting for a husband who would never return was not peculiar to the wives of fishermen, and that, in view of the fact that there were in England alone a million more

females than males, some artist ought to paint a picture and call it "A Hopeless Evening."

Soon after this improving discussion we left the area of street-lamps and arrived, I suppose, in Newlyn. I write "suppose" because it was so dark we could not actually *see* Newlyn; but we felt it. That is to say, we kept coming across the unexpected corners and doorways. I also came across a goodish number of unexpected boulders, which hurt me very much in various places from about the end of the large toe to the cap of the knee. I heard dear Muriel falling here and there, and I gathered from her comments that she was not, on the whole, wildly delighted with Newlyn.

I think she was wrong, however, in calling it unhealthy. There certainly was a decided aroma of uncooked fish, but what else are you to expect in a place devoted to high pictorial art? I mean to say, artists have no time to *bury* fish. What they don't eat I presume they throw into the street, which would keep reminding them where they were, and inspire the marine atmosphere of their immortal works. I do wish dear Muriel would cultivate the habit of looking on the bright side of things.

The next morning we rose early, paid our bill, and set out, at last, for Land's End! There was a little trouble about the bill because they charged me for two breakfasts—four-and-sixpence each—which we had not had. They said I had ordered the breakfasts overnight, trying to get back at me for the fuss about the coffee. I admitted that I had ordered them overnight, but pointed out that they had refused to serve them, which was true. I left the hotel singing "The Pirates of Penzance"

at the top of my voice, which much amused the other visitors who were paying their bills. Those who had to remain, having contracted for a week or longer, were not nearly so gay.

We breakfasted far more inexpensively, and probably better, at a shop in the town, and then found the road to Land's End, which is certainly the worst in England. It must be. I know I said the road from Bampton to South Molton was the worst in England, but that was before I had tried the road to Land's End.

There are about eight miles of this road. It is very narrow, and the stream of sharrybangs is incessant. The surface, moreover, is so bad that people with false teeth are warned either to walk or go by aeroplane. We did the journey in about two hours, which is considered very rapid for a small car in that part of the world.

But when you do arrive, O, how romantic ! I rushed straight off to the edge of the cliff, and gazed at the Atlantic Ocean. Except for a rock with a lighthouse on it, there was nothing except water between me and America ! Land's End ! The last little bit of England. Nowhere could you get such a thrill except at John o' Groats, and that is in Scotland.

Most of the people seemed to be rather at a loss as to what to do with themselves. They had a look at the sea, of course, and then went into the hotel for a small Bass. After that they would have another look at the Atlantic, and then return to the hotel for a small Guinness. I watched one man do that eleven times, so the Bass was one up on the Guinness.

DASTARDLY ATTACK ON "FAST LADY" 205

Their ladies had more enterprise. They bought post cards, and wrote on them -- "Here we are, love from Alice" -- and posted them in the box provided for the purpose. Then they would buy some bananas, and throw the skins over the cliff to make it nice for people who were going to sit there after lunch and look at the Atlantic. After that they would retire to the hotel, and wait there till the sharrybang was ready to return to Penzance.

All very jolly and health-giving.

One of the most amusing things at Land's End, which teems with amusement if you have time to look for it, is the local policeman. He quite enters into the fun of the thing, and pretends to arrest the visitors, subsequently getting photographed with his hand on their shoulder. This causes roars of laughter, as may well be imagined.

He told me that he describes himself as "the first and last policeman." I took some capital photographs of him, and promised to send him copies, which I must remember to do. It must be very lonely for him there in the winter, with no visitors to throw banana-skins about or take his photograph. Even in the summer his wife keeps him company whilst he is on duty, which I thought very kind of her. Policemen's wives in other districts might well take the hint.

I took a photograph of him with his wife, which seemed to afford them both much satisfaction. I made rather a good joke in this connection. I said: "And this lady, I suppose, is your first and last wife?" They quite appreciated the quip, but Muriel told me afterwards that it was a silly remark because it might not be his first or his last.

Muriel is a dear girl, but her sense of humour is not so keen as I could wish. For instance, here is another thing that happened at Land's End. We went into the hotel for lunch, and there was a huge pile of tomatoes on a side table. As it was a cold lunch I said we would have some tomatoes, but the waitress shook her head.

"You can't have tomatoes," she said.

"Why not?" I inquired, surprised. There were enough tomatoes for an Army Corps.

"Are you stopping in the hotel?" she asked.

"Yes, till after lunch," I replied.

"Oh! Well, then you can't have tomatoes."

"On what conditions," I asked, "could we have tomatoes?"

"Only if you're sleeping in the hotel," was the answer.

I was much amused, the idea being, no doubt, that tomatoes are supposed to have a soporific effect, and people might fall asleep on the way back to Penzance. Muriel said lettuces were soporific, but not tomatoes, and was really cross about the whole matter. However, she was so furious with the road on the way back to Penzance that she forgot about the tomatoes.

Not being so rich as when I left home (in fact, my stock of money was beginning to get alarmingly low, despite Muriel's generosity) I did not linger in Penzance, but pushed on for Falmouth.

To get to Falmouth from Penzance, you have to go through a place called Helston. My little guide told me that for the sportsman there was "ample resource in this grand district, fishing being plentiful." It also said that for the pedestrian there was

"no richer treat to be found in the Cornish Riviera than a walk along the coastguard path round the Lizard Peninsula from St. Keverne."

"How would you like to stop awhile in Helston?" I asked Muriel, detailing the attractions I have just set out.

"Sounds pretty mouldy," she replied.

"There is one other thing," I added. "Helston has the southernmost railway station in England."

"Let Helston keep it," advised Muriel.

"Then you don't wish to see this quaint place? You may never pass this way again, you know!"

"I'll risk it."

"Very well. We'll go straight through."

Which just shows how foolish it is to tempt the gods by saying you will do anything without adding, "all being well," or "the gods willing."

Helston, as it happens, is a most peculiar little town. For some reason or another which I cannot understand, it is built on the side of a very steep hill. I don't mean that part of it is on a hill, like Bristol. The whole town is on a hill, as if Helston was trying to stand upright on its tail.

What is more, you don't see the hill until you get to it. Anyway, I didn't. I ran gently along the road outside Helston, turned a rather sharp corner, and saw in front of me what looked like the roof of a house with other houses on it.

Should we do it or should we not? There was no time to hesitate. I could not wait to consult my dear Muriel. I simply rammed the lever into the lowest gear, accelerated as much as ever I could, and we commenced the terrible ascent.

The "Fast Lady" breasted the rise in the pluckiest

manner, and if all had been well she might have accomplished the awful task. But all was not well. There were three circumstances unknown to me, and for which, consequently, I was not prepared.

The first was that the hill bends in the middle, the latter half being even steeper than the first. The second was that this latter or steeper half was under repair, which meant that the entire width of the road was piled high with a rich layer of sharp flints. And the third was that a motor-cyclist, also ignorant of the repairing work, was about to descend the hill and meet me in the middle.

So everything, as I say, was unexpected, and everything happened at once. I laboured round the bend in the hill and saw three carts, six horses, six to eight men, and a steam-roller; add one motor-cyclist travelling towards me at a hundred miles an hour.

What could I do? My first instinct was to shut my eyes and offer up a short prayer. This I resisted. Should I stop dead? In that case, I stood a very good chance of running down the hill backwards, and I had had enough of that at Bristol. Muriel said nothing, and I had no time even to glance at her beautiful face for inspiration.

I held on up the hill. The motor-cyclist held on down. The men went on with their work as though neither of us existed.

To my right of the carts there was just room for me to squeeze through if I got there before the motor-cyclist. As I have explained, I could not very well wait for him, and he showed no intention of waiting for me. It was a race for the gap!

DASTARDLY ATTACK ON "FAST LADY" 209

"Look out!" cried Muriel, for once in a way perturbed.

"I am!" I shouted.

"Cyclist coming!" she yelled.

"Can't help it!" I retorted.

"Pull in to your left!"

"No, no! Too many carts!"

"You'll kill the man!"

"What a pity!"

We got to the gap at the same moment! I waited for the crash!

Then something happened. I must here confess that I don't know quite what happened. Muriel thinks I pulled over to the left at the last moment, but I didn't. The Flick went to the left, and the cyclist dashed past in safety. Muriel says he yelled "Thanks," but I never heard him. I was merely conscious of the fact that I was right under a cartload of stones, and that the man in charge of it was loosening the pin to release the load.

"Just a moment!" I called out.

He glanced up, saw me under the tail-board of the cart, and *actually released the pin!* Then followed the most awful clamour you can imagine—a whole cartload of best Cornish flints roaring down on to the bonnet of the "Fast Lady"! Some of them bounced off the bonnet and broke the wind screen, but by that time we were huddling our faces in our arms and waiting for death.

I thought the roaring of those flints would never stop. It seemed to go on for hours and hours. It was more like a stone waterfall than anything else. A Niagara of stones!

But it did stop at last, and I stood up to see

what was left of my poor little vehicle. The bonnet was entirely buried, but the half in which we were sitting had escaped by a miracle. We were not even scratched.

The foreman of the gang came round from behind his carts and touched his cap.

" Afternoon, sir," said he.

" Good afternoon," I replied.

" You was in the way," he said.

" So were you," I answered.

" What made you pull under them flints ? "

" To save the cyclist," I explained.

" You'd like 'em shifted, I expect ? "

" It would be a help," I admitted.

He called to his gang, and they proceeded to dig out the Flick. The engine had long since stopped. I expected to find it smashed to atoms, but it was not, strange to say, though the bonnet was quite unrecognisable. Indeed, it was more like a tam-o-shanter than a bonnet.

When all the stones had at last been removed, I made a feeble effort to start the engine. I rather hoped it would refuse to start, because my nerve for that hill had quite gone. I need not have worried. The handle was so bent it would not turn at all.

" Is there a garage in Helston ? " I asked.

All the men turned simultaneously and pointed to the top of the hill. I got Muriel to walk up there, and ask them to send a car to give me a tow ; she returned with the information that one of their cars was out of order, and the other out on hire.

" We shall have to stop the night," I said resignedly.

DASTARDLY ATTACK ON "FAST LADY" 211

"Not there you can't," said the foreman. "I got to get these flints laid."

"Well, you did it," I told him, "and you must get me out of it."

"We might shove you back a bit."

"I don't want to be shoved back. I want to get to that garage at the top of the hill."

"Why not 'itch 'im to the steam-roll?" suggested one of the men.

A bright idea! The carts were pulled out of the way, the steam-roller backed cautiously towards the Flick, a rope was attached. I sat in the car and gripped the wheel.

"Right away!" shouted the foreman, and the steam-roller bravely ascended that awful slope, the little "Fast Lady" trailing behind. Progress was not rapid, and the small Helstonians cheered unnecessarily; but we got to the top in triumph.

CHAPTER XV

A NEW USE FOR A BUTTERFLY NET

TO Muriel's intense disgust, we had to stay three nights at Helston. After all, as I pointed out, you can't expect a car to be as good as ever after she has been deluged with a ton of flints. I explained to my wife that many cars would never have gone again. It was only the sterling good material put into pre-war cars that saved the situation.

The garage people wanted me to have a new bonnet, but I could not afford it, besides which the work would have delayed us too long. So I told them to beat the old one into something like shape, and let it go at that. As for the starting-handle, that was beyond all hope. It reminded me of the cow with the crumpled horn. They found a second-hand starting-handle which would take its place, and gave me the old one to keep as a souvenir of Helston.

Not that either of us, I fancy, will ever forget Helston. I mentioned that it had the southernmost railway station in England. Well, that, of course, is always something, and made an object for a short walk, but the mere fact of being the southernmost does not really lend much distinction

to a station. As we gazed at it, I said to dear Muriel :

“ There is no railway station in England farther south than this one.”

“ So I gathered,” was her reply.

“ If you want to go farther south,” I persisted, “ you must find some other means of locomotion.”

“ Such as a car,” said Muriel, bitterly.

“ Yes, or Shanks’s pony. The guide-book says there is no richer treat for the pedestrian than a walk along the coastguard path round the Lizard. Shall we try it ? ”

“ I suppose so,” agreed Muriel, miserably.

I had my butterfly-net, but the excitement of the first chase was so intense that I nearly fell over the cliff, whereupon Muriel took it from me, and carried it herself. I was then at liberty to gaze my fill upon the wonderful expanse of water at our feet, and to enlarge upon the romantic history of our sea-girt isle.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, the “ Fast Lady ” was once more ready for the road. They had really done wonders with the bonnet. Although still very crumpled, it had almost the shape of a bonnet, and that was more than I could reasonably have hoped.

We arrived at Falmouth about six o’clock in the evening, and were at once struck with the beauty of the harbour. I had never in my life dreamt of anything so satisfying as that huge expanse of inland water, covered with yachts and boats of all descriptions. Even Muriel was stirred. She said it would be lovely to have a boat of our own that

we could live in whenever we came to Falmouth. In the meantime, we had yet to fix up a room for that night.

"Don't be in too great a hurry," urged Muriel. "Don't let us be content with the first thing they offer. I want a very nice room here, to make up for that cottage at Helston. I want a view of the harbour, for one thing, and all modern luxuries."

"Certainly, my darling," I replied. "Our holiday is nearing its end"—which was just as well—"and you shall have the best Falmouth can provide. Come!"

We drove on, and came to an hotel which encouraged us as to the outer appearance.

"This might do," I suggested.

"Ye-es," admitted Muriel, scanning it critically.

We alighted from the car and entered. A very grand footman directed us to a very grand office, where we were received by a very grand lady. She was engaged in conversation with some very grand visitors, and I could see signs of impatience on the face of my dear wife.

At last our turn came.

"Have you a double room for to-night?" I asked.

"There is just one," was the answer.

"Has it a view of the harbour?" inquired Muriel haughtily.

The very grand lady smiled. She was all black and shiny with great wealth.

"Oh, dear, no. As a matter of fact, it's in the basement."

"And what is the price?" I pursued.

The grand lady told us. I caught at my breath, and was only just in time.

"What does that include?"

"Nothing but the room."

Muriel walked straight out and got into the car. Having raised my hat to the grand lady, I followed.

"We must go back," I said, "to the one we noticed on the way in. It was a little old-fashioned, perhaps, but sometimes these old-fashioned places are very comfortable."

"Basement!" muttered Muriel.

It was getting on towards dinner-time, so I drove as rapidly as I could through the very narrow streets. A few threats of violence followed us, especially from some gentlemen who had apparently been working at the docks, but we were not dispirited.

At the old-fashioned hotel we were received by a very charming old lady, all smiles. I told her what we wanted, and she smiled more than ever.

"There is not a vacant room in the hotel," she said, beaming.

"But what are we to do?" demanded Muriel.

"I really don't know," chuckled the charming old lady, "unless you can get a room somewhere in the town. I dare say we could let you have a meal here, but not till everybody else has finished, as the coffee-room is quite full at every meal. Ha! ha!"

Here the porter intervened.

"If you don't mind a bit of a climb, sir, I know

where there's a room." He led the way out of the hotel and pointed to the skies. ("Not yet," I murmured, but the porter did not mean that.) Perched on the summit of a mountain, we could distinguish a row of small villas. "If you care to walk up there—the car won't go up, but I'll keep an eye on 'er—and ask for Mrs. Johnson at Number 8, and say I sent you, she might manage something just for the night. And that's the last room in Falmouth, I know for a fact."

We thanked him and went. It was a long and stiff climb, but we found Mrs. Johnson at last.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "Oh, dear, no! I haven't a room not till the end of October!"

"But we must sleep *somewhere*!" protested Muriel.

Mrs. Johnson reflected. Then she examined us narrowly, and finally spoke again in a hushed voice.

"Well," she whispered, "it's like this. All my rooms is let, but one gentleman is away for the night. I've no business to let his room, of course, but you can't very well walk about all night, can you? I'm willing to take the risk, if you are."

"What risk?" I inquired.

"The risk of his turning up and wanting his room. If that happened, of course I should have to turn you out."

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed Muriel, and we clambered down the hill again.

"Any luck?" asked the porter.

"We draw the line at three in a bed," I explained

There is a nice wall overlooking the harbour. We went and sat on it, the crumpled little Flick, still loaded with our luggage, looking very forlorn outside the hotel. It was enough to melt a heart of stone.

"It's too late to go on," I said, "and the next place might be just as full. We shall have to go back and get that basement room."

Muriel consented, poor child, so we got into the car and once again threaded our way through those tortuous streets. The grand lady was just as grand as before. In fact, I think she had more gold about her this time.

"We'll take that room you mentioned," I told her.

"Which room was that?"

"The double one in the basement."

"Oh! We let that ten minutes ago. A pity you didn't decide to have it at the time, isn't it?"

One had to be brave. I glanced at Muriel as we left the hotel and rejoined the battered "Fast Lady." Muriel was looking pale and tired. I don't know how I was looking, but I know how I felt. Still, one simply had to be as brave as brave.

"Well," I said cheerfully, "and what shall we do now?"

"Drown ourselves," answered Muriel.

"Oh, come, my dear! The day is darkest before dawn!"

"I know. Also that barking dogs seldom bite, and rolling stones gather no moss. Can you think of anything else original to say?"

"You're tired, my darling. Shall we get some food and resume the search later?"

"We can't have any food until all the other people have finished. She said so. Besides, if we can't find a place to sleep while it's light, we're not likely to succeed in the dark."

"That's true. That's very true. I vote we go back and have another chat with the porter."

Muriel made no objection, so off we went yet again through the narrow streets, which were now thick with people. In one street we were held up for quite ten minutes, and a policeman took advantage of the opportunity to point out that joy-riding was not encouraged in Falmouth.

"Don't be an ass!" I snapped.

"Oh, that's the talk, is it?" retorted the policeman, producing his notebook. "It so 'appens I've seen you going up and down these streets pretty nigh all the evening. I've took the number of the car. Where are you stopping?"

"Nowhere," I informed him, and Muriel laughed.

"'Refused to give address,'" wrote the policeman.

"I'm not refusing!" I stormed. "I can give you my London address, if you like, but I can't give you an address here because we haven't got one. What's the good of getting a crowd round?"

"Stand back!" shouted the policeman. "Now, sir! Do I understand that you and this lady don't know where you're going to stop to-night?"

"No, we do not! I wish we did!"

"Very well!" He shut up his book and replaced it, with some difficulty, in the tail-pocket of his coat. "I've got yer number and I shall keep an

eye on yer. We don't want no vagrants in this town. Where did you come from to-day ? "

" Helston."

" Right. If you take my advice, you'll go back there."

" Never," muttered Muriel.

" Drive on ! " ordered the constable. " You're holding up all the traffic ! "

It's no good arguing with fellows like that. The crowd surged back somehow, and we crawled through them. Outside the old-fashioned hotel, the only place where we had received promise of food, the porter was playing with a dog, and the charming old lady was smiling happily from her parlour window.

" Any luck ? " asked the porter.

" No, except that the police are getting suspicious of our movements."

" Police, eh ? That's bad. Very sharp on motorists they are about here."

" What is that village on the far side of the harbour ? " asked Muriel.

" Them houses over there ? Why, th. s Flushing."

" Could we get a room there ? "

" You might. Why not go over in a boat and try ? "

We agreed, so he hailed a boatman who put us across and directed us to a certain cottage in the village. And here at last we found a vacant room. It did not quite come up to dear Muriel's requirements. There was no view of the harbour, and modern luxuries were entirely absent. There was not even gas, for example. But there was a sitting-

room, and a bedroom at the top of a twisty staircase, and nobody would have the right to turn us out in the middle of the night. So we took it and went back by boat to get some food, garage the car, and secure our luggage.

" Any luck ? " asked the porter, who had finished playing with the dog, and was now flirting with a chambermaid amid the shadows of the July evening.

" Great luck ! " I cried, and told him what it was. He said he knew the lady to whose house we had been directed, and she would make us very comfortable.

Well, I suppose she did. I mean to say, you can't altogether blame a person for what goes on in their house *ultra vires*, so to speak. You couldn't blame the lady, for example, because we had to go to bed by candle-light. If there is no gas in Flushing, there is no gas. I am a reasonable man, and I see that. Neither could you blame the lady because there was no bath-room. It was not her house ; she rented it, and the landlord had not provided a bath-room. That was the fault of the landlord. He was clearly a selfish fellow, and I hope he sleeps uneasily o' nights.

I know *we* did. And that is putting it in the gentlest possible manner. We hardly slept at all. And yet our broken night was not wholly without benefit, for it led to my dear Muriel acquiring a good deal of entomological instruction that she would otherwise have missed. If it comes to that, I myself learned a great deal about the common or household flea which was previously a sealed book to me, and I a member of the Camberwell Entomological Society !

I have said that we were very tired. Why these adventures come to people who are particularly tired I know not, but so it is. Perhaps this insect has a peculiar passion for tired people. Perhaps it appeals to its perverted sense of humour to make those active who yearn to be passive. I must ask our Honorary Secretary about that. It would make a most interesting paper some evening—say on a Ladies' Night.

We had supper at the old-fashioned hotel and crossed to Flushing by boat. Both these events passed off well, except that I think the waiter rather resented the extra work, and the boatman who took us over was very drunk and collided with another boat impelled in the opposite direction by his god-son, who was also drunk. Anyway, we got some cold lamb and cold potatoes and cold cheese and cold bread—all very good when you are hungry—and we were not drowned, which is a relief when you are very tired.

I think it would have been better if our boatman and his god-son had not struck at each other with oars after the collision, because they might easily have hit us with the oars or capsized the boats. But I don't want to be pernickety. Travel is travel, and travellers must put up with whatsoever befalls. But no traveller in the world can be philosophical if he is kept awake half the night in the manner in which my dear Muriel and myself were kept awake.

I will tell you about it, so prepare to shed tears of sympathy

It began almost immediately after we got into bed. We did not go to bed at once. There was

a nice lamp, with a good rugged wick, and we sat up for a little while and yawned in the smoky lamp-light. So it was probably fairly late when we blew out the candle, and everybody else in the house was fast asleep.

I think I had just dropped off when I was awakened by the voice of my dear wife. She may also have prodded me in the back.

"What's the matter?" I asked sleepily.

"Light the candle, will you?"

"Light the candle, my love?"

"Yes! Light the beastly candle and hurry up!"

The matches had fallen on the floor, but I found them at last and made a light. Poor Muriel was sitting up in bed, looking very sleepy, very cross and very charming.

"What is it, my darling?" I inquired.

"I don't know, but I have my suspicions. Have *you* felt anything?"

"No. What do you mean?"

"Have you been bitten?"

"Bitten, my love? What in the world are you talking about?"

"Oh, give me the candle and go to sleep!" snapped Muriel.

There was another little room near ours which we had arranged to use as a dressing-room. Maddened by the unwelcome visitor, Muriel was hurriedly making for that room when she missed her footing on the twisty staircase and came down with a most sickening crash. The candle flew out of its socket and was immediately extinguished. As we had no other, and I could not wait to fumble

for the matches, I had to go to her assistance in the pitch darkness.

"Where are you?" I called, much alarmed.

"Down here," answered Muriel feebly.

"Where's the candle?"

"I don't know."

"What has happened?"

"I fell down these filthy stairs."

"Are you hurt?"

"Of course I'm hurt!"

"Have you broken anything?"

"Everything, I should imagine. Don't stand there asking questions. Get the matches and find the candle!"

I went back to the bedroom, and made a systematic search all over the floor on my hands and knees. I kept finding everything over and over again except the matches. But they came to hand at last, and by the light of one of them I found my poor Muriel.

No bones appeared to be broken, but she had bruised herself somewhat, which made her very peevish. To add to her annoyance, during the mêlée her unpleasant little friend had seized the opportunity to escape.

"Well, that's all to the good!" I said cheerily.

"I don't think so," complained Muriel. "You're never safe with those little beasts till they're drowned. I'll bet anything he's coming quietly up the stairs at this moment, and will be all ready to pounce the moment I drop off to sleep."

"Would you like me to search the stairs, my love?"

"You'd only burn the house down. I shall stay

awake for a little while to see what happens. You can go to sleep if you like."

"I couldn't be so selfish," I declared. "Would you like me to read to you? It may soothe your nerves!"

"Have you got anything to read up here?"

"I have the 'Entomologist's Vade-Mecum'—a most interesting volume. If you like, I can tell you all about the life and habits of the ordinary flea."

She did not answer, so I got the volume and began:

"Fleas are insects which may be regarded as flies modified for a parasitic life, although they are sometimes placed in a separate order as *Aphaniptera*."

"What does that mean?"

"Inconspicuous wings, my love. 'They have no wings,'" I read on by the flickering light of the candle, "'but the legs, especially the last pair, are long, strong, and well fitted for jumping.'"

"I know that," murmured Muriel.

"The common flea is a very typical example, being wonderfully adapted to its special mode of life. It can exist for a prolonged period under conditions where it is difficult to believe that its normal diet can be available."

"What is its normal diet? We might put some down outside the door."

"Well, my love, I'm afraid it's you."

"How horrible! Does it tell you the best way to catch them?"

"No, but I've heard that soap is very useful."

"A good idea! Get me a piece of soap, and

then you can go to sleep. Don't put the candle out."

"But what is your own programme?"

"I'm going to wait," declared Muriel through her clenched teeth.

I was reluctant to leave the poor child to keep this midnight vigil alone, but my eyes really would not keep open. I closed the "Entomologist's Vade-Mecum," therefore, laid my head on the pillow, and was instantly asleep.

I awoke with a terrible start. Some cold and slimy monster from the deep had settled on my leg and was trying to imbibe my blood! Terrified, I gave a loud cry!

"Don't move!" exclaimed Muriel. "I've got 'im!"

I looked down. My dear wife was pressing the piece of soap firmly against my leg. She must have held it there for quite a minute, and then, slowly and carefully, removed it.

There was no flea. Muriel was nearly heart-broken, having stayed awake an hour for this very purpose.

We were just discussing what could possibly have happened to the enemy when I saw the fellow leap high into the air and disappear under the bed-clothes. And then I had one of the most brilliant ideas of my life.

Bidding Muriel keep quite still, I took the candle, went down to the sitting-room and got my *butterfly-net*! Never before had I heard of a butterfly-net being put to such a use, yet why not?

I thoroughly enjoyed the chase, and was at last rewarded with complete success. By half-past two

in the morning the rascal was taking his first and last swim.

" After all," murmured Muriel just before she fell asleep, " it's something to have an ento-thingummy for a husband."

Imagine how such praise from those dear lips sweetened my dreams !

CHAPTER XVI

DEAR MURIEL'S VERY WORST DAY

WE left Falmouth very early next morning. It is a beautiful place, but Muriel had taken a dislike to it. This was not so much the fault of Falmouth as the *Alphaniptera*.

It was a glorious morning when we pulled out and turned the "Fast Lady's" battered bonnet in the direction of Truro. There is, of course, a very fine cathedral at Truro, but I could not persuade dear Muriel to even glance at it. She said all cathedrals were much alike, and we had a long drive before us, and it might rain. As for the grammar school, she would not consider it for a moment.

We next came to Bodmin—a place simply teeming with interest, but we did not stop. At Launceston we pulled up for five minutes! Imagine giving five minutes only to Launceston, a town which figured so prominently during the Civil War! The garage man from whom I purchased petrol was astounded to hear that our stay would be so short. He said some people came to Launceston every summer and stayed for weeks and weeks.

"What do they do?" asked Muriel.

"Go for a good walk, miss," said the garage man.

"A bad ride is better than a good walk," observed Muriel.

The garage man was so amused at this remark—which seemed to me a little ungrateful—that he spilt about half a gallon of petrol over the Flick's engine.

After Launceston you get a long and very lovely run through Okehampton to Exeter. And here I must pay a tribute to the Flick. Whether she knew she was on her way home, or whether it was the petrol that had been spilt over her works I know not, but the fact is she ran so smoothly and sweetly that to drive her was a real pleasure. I don't mean that we went fast—ten to twelve miles an hour was quite sufficient—but every little bit of the machinery seemed to be working.

" This is motoring ! " I boasted.

" Wait till you're out of the wood," advised Muriel.

The dear girl, as usual, was right. Had we not run so smoothly all the way from Falmouth to Exeter, we should have been content to stop the night in Exeter. Had we stopped the night in Exeter, we should not, in all probability, have missed our way and gone to Lyme Regis. And had we not gone to Lyme Regis—well, you shall hear.

We got to Exeter about six, and had tea at a very beautiful hotel facing the cathedral.

" Shall I inquire about a room ? " I suggested.

Muriel seemed uncertain. I saw her peep out of the window with a somewhat apprehensive expression.

" Is there anything the matter ? " I inquired sympathetically. " Has anyone been frightening you ? "

"Not exactly," she replied. But that look, almost of terror, was still on her face.

"My dear!" I urged. "Do tell me! I feel sure there is something! Won't you confide in me?"

"I'm afraid you wouldn't understand."

"Oh, yes, I would! Really, I would! Come, my little one! Tell Leonard what is troubling you!"

"Well, I'd rather not stop here the night, if you don't mind."

"Of course you shan't if you feel like that about it. But give me your reason so that I may guard against any such unpleasantness in the future."

"All right. . . . It's the cathedral."

"The cathedral, my darling? Don't you like it?"

"I'm afraid I don't. I don't like *any* cathedrals! They depress me!"

Nerves, of course. The poor child had a cathedral on the brain. Perhaps in childhood she had been frightened by a cathedral. I had never heard of a precisely similar case, but I do know that there are many people who cannot touch strawberries, and I am even acquainted with a man who is positively ill if he enters a room with an egg in it. A friend of mine shudders at the mere mention of the female sex—he is a bachelor, poor fellow, and likely to remain one—and another man in our office had an aunt who used to be seized with a sort of ague at the sight of a cheque-book. The result was unfortunate for the poor lady. Her lawyer used to sign all her cheques for her, and one day he drew and signed such a good one in his own favour that it practically used up her entire fortune.

For all those, a temperamental aversion to cathedrals was something quite new to me, and will rather tend to complicate our lives.

" I will ask them," I said, " to let us out the back way. I don't think we shall see any more—you know what—between here and Dulwich. I'll take the car round into the main street. In the meantime, my poor darling, look closely at this copy of *Eve*, and try to forget all about the—well, we know, don't we ? "

The manager of the hotel very kindly consented to my plan, and I got Muriel away without another glimpse of the cathedral.

There are three roads eastwards out of Exeter. One goes to Taunton, another to Yeovil, and the third to Lyme Regis. I had meant to take the Yeovil Road, but in my hurry and excitement we found ourselves on the way to Lyme Regis. Muriel protested she was glad, having always wanted to see Lyme Regis, but when she said that she did not know, and I did not know either, that we should have to negotiate some of the very worst hills in England, both getting into Lyme Regis and away from it.

We sailed on gaily until the road began to descend in a most alarming manner.

" This is a bit steep," I muttered.

" Will the brakes hold her ? "

" If they don't give way under the strain."

" Is there anything else you can do ? "

" Well, they do say you should engage your lowest gear when descending a bad hill."

" Why don't you do it ? "

" Because I should have to let go the side brake,

and then we should be going too fast to get into the low gear. . . ."

"It's getting steeper."

"Yes, so I thought."

"What about running into the bank?"

"It isn't a bank; it's a deep ditch. Could you jump out?"

"No. I'll stick by you."

My heart thrilled at the words, but the dear girl did not understand.

"Our combined weight is too much for the brakes. If you could get out, I think I might manage it."

"Oh! Right you are!"

Muriel leapt out at once. Not only that, but she hung on to the back of the "Fast Lady" with all her weight. Our speed, which had been about five miles an hour, lessened marvellously, the road having flattened a little. In fact, if I hadn't given her a secret touch with the accelerator, we should have stopped altogether.

I pulled up at the first likely inn to which we came. Below me stretched more hill, right to the rocky shore. I remembered that we should have to start off with that bit in the morning, and felt a little sick.

The landlord of the inn said he had one room, and only one. He also told me, later in the evening, that inn-keeping was a nuisance and a bore, and he never felt so happy as when he had nobody staying in the house at all.

"For me," said the landlord, "the life of a country gentleman is good enough. I live for sport—hunting, fishing, shooting. The people who come here in the summer know nothing whatever about

sport. They go down to the seashore, and paddle, and pick up shells ! Give me a horse that can jump a stone wall and climb a ravine ! That's the life ! "

" What sort of a road is it," I asked, " from here to Dorchester ? "

The landlord laughed. It was not a comforting laugh. It had bitterness and a menace in it.

" What sort of a road ? Have you never heard of Charmouth and Chideock ? "

" Never," I assured him.

" Well, you will. Ask anybody about here. Charmouth is the devil. You'll have to tackle that the moment you get out of Lyme Regis. A long hill up, with some bad curves and a terrible gradient. The District Council do not hold themselves responsible for accidents. In fact, they've put up a notice warning motorists not to attempt it.

" But Charmouth is nothing to Chideock ! A babe in arms ! After Charmouth you run along an undulating strip for a while and then you come to the famous Chideock Hill ! Down, down, down, with a gradient in places of one in four ! A rough surface, all loose stones, and a right-angled curve in the middle with houses on each side. My word, the accidents they've had on that hill ! And there's no doctor, so far as I know, in Chideock ! Why should there be ? An undertaker is all they need there ! "

" Thank you," I said in a low voice.

" But you'll be all right if your brakes are good."

" Unfortunately, they're not. One of them has given way already since we left home. Still, it would be just as bad to go back up the hill we descended this evening."

"Every bit. But there you are! It's all sport!"

I could not eat much supper. The meal being over, I suggested to Muriel a short walk. I wanted to examine Charmouth and Chideock on foot.

It was a fine evening, but very dark. We descended the steep hill that led to the sea level, turned several sharp corners, and soon left the lights of the town behind us. Then the road began to ascend.

"I don't see much in this," said Muriel.

We walked on. There were high walls or hedges on each side of the road, and masses of trees above those, so it was really as black as ink. We could not even see each other, much less the road.

"It's rising now," I observed.

"Only a little."

We walked on. I began to perspire.

"Steep now," I told Muriel.

"How can you tell?"

"I'm so hot and out of breath. So are you."

"I'm nothing of the sort."

"I thought I could hear you panting, my love."

"You're making such a row yourself, you couldn't possibly hear anybody else."

"I wish I'd brought the torch. Do you think we could see the gradient by the light of a match?"

"You can try, if you like."

So I struck a match, and held it to the roadway. Of course, it is awfully difficult to tell how much a hill rises when you can only illumine a small piece of it, because the surface is all alike. This caused me to reflect, and reflection brought inspiration in its train.

" What are you doing, scuffling about down there ? " asked Muriel. The match had gone out.

" Strike a light, my love, and you'll see."

The dear girl did so, and found me lying on my back, with my head pointing down the hill.

" What on earth's the idea ? " queried Muriel.

" I'm making a spirit-level of myself. If the gradient is very steep, the blood will run into my head. Strike another match, and see how red I am."

I shut my eyes and felt the flame close to my face.

" You're going black ! " cried Muriel.

I feared it. The gradient must have been one in four at that point. Another two or three minutes and I should have had a fit.

" I think I saw a notice-board on the side of the road," said Muriel.

" We must read it. Give me the matches, my dear."

It took eleven matches to read the whole notice, but I had it complete at last. This is what it said :

DANGER !!

MOTORISTS USING THIS ROAD

DO SO AT THEIR OWN

PERIL.

By Order.

" Well ? What do you make of that, my dear ? "

" It means that if the car runs backwards and we get killed, they're not going to pay anything. I never supposed they would. Did you ? "

" I wasn't really worrying about that. I was wondering what will happen in the morning."

"You might get somebody to give us a pull up."

"But that would look so bad. I'll tell you what. If you wouldn't mind walking behind with a large block of wood, you could slip it under one of the wheels if the car began to run backwards."

"All right," agreed Muriel, wearily.

We retraced our steps to the hotel. The landlord was in the hall, telling exciting stories to the visitors about accidents that had taken place on Charmouth and Chideock.

"There were five of them in the car. They're all buried in the churchyard round the corner. Then I remember a case of a motor-bike and side-car. Fine young people they were, on their honeymoon, we thought. Well——"

"Permit me to interrupt you one moment," said I. "I should be obliged if you would send a small neat brandy up to my room."

I lay awake for some hours, listening to the sounds in the hotel and the mournful striking of the church clock. At last I fell into a troubled slumber, and dreamt that the Flick, with Muriel and myself in it, was hanging to the edge of a precipice by the radiator cap. The worst of it was that people on the shore below and the summit of the old cliff took not the slightest notice of our predicament.

I awoke in a profuse perspiration. It was five o'clock. Should I ever see the sun rise again? A mournful thought. How fair was the world and how fair my sleeping bride! She, at any rate, would be saved, being busy on the road with the big log.

I got up, had a bath, dressed, and went out to look for a suitable log. In a neighbouring field I found the very thing—big enough to stop the

Flick (perhaps) and not too big for poor Muriel to carry.

I then did everything to the car I could think of—filled the radiator, emptied my spare tin of petrol into the tank, and oiled the fan very, very thoroughly. I started the engine and got it enormously hot, and felt all the tyres. No man could do more—at least, no man with my limited knowledge of motor-cars.

"You look pale," said Muriel at breakfast. (Breakfast ! What a farce !)

"I've been up a long time, busy with the car."

"Going Charmouth way ?" asked a man at another table.

I made a noise like "Yes."

"Better look to your plugs," advised the man in a serious tone.

"Is it a—a steep hill ?" I inquired carelessly.

"One of the worst in England. And Chideock's worse still."

"But people must do it," I argued.

"Oh, yes, they do it—with powerful cars."

"What's your car, sir, if I may put the question ?"

"A Ford. We all use Fords about here. We know something."

"Ask him if a Flick will do it," whispered Muriel.

"Excuse me, sir. Do you think a Flick will do it ?"

"A what ?"

"A Flick."

"I'll buy it," replied the man, and winked.

"Shall I sell it to him ?" I whispered to Muriel.

"You bet," returned Muriel. But when, after

breakfast, I went to look for the stranger, he had already left. So there was a chance lost.

We put the huge log of wood between us until we were out of the town. The landlord, who came out to see us off, asked me what I wanted with it. I made an evasive answer, and we set off.

As soon as we had turned all the corners and were out of sight, I stopped the Flick, and Muriel got down, nursing the huge piece of wood in her arms. I gave her a good start up the hill, because I meant, if I could, to "rush it." That is an expression in motoring which means to go as fast as ever you can up a hill. Muriel was to wait in the very steepest part, and use the log if necessary.

It was rather pitiful to see her go staggering off with her burden, but I consoled myself with the thought that *she* was safe whatever happened. When she had rounded the bend I gave her five minutes more, and then put the Flick at the hill, keeping her in the lowest gear.

To my utter astonishment we passed Muriel still clasping the log, at ten miles an hour! I was at the top of that hill in no time, and, looking back, I could see poor Muriel toiling after me!

She was quite right to be cross, but I don't think she need have been quite so cross as she was. To hear her talk—and she could have been heard fields and fields away—anyone would have thought it was all a practical joke on my part, and that I had done it on purpose to get her to climb the hill on foot.

In vain I tried to point out that I had meant well—that I was saving her life at the risk of my own. She said, "Rats!" and all sorts of other violent things which quite surprised me. To speak

frankly, I was not at all happy, and we still had Chideock to descend.

In her indignation, Muriel had forgotten to throw away the log, of which I was glad. When we reached the brow of Chideock—an awful affair, with the sea miles and miles below us—I stopped.

" What's wrong now ? " asked my wife.

" I want you to get out, my dear, and place the log beneath the front wheel should I find the car getting beyond my control."

" Do you mean to say I've got to lug that beastly thing all the way down this hill ? Why, it's miles long ! "

" Of course, my dear, I don't insist. I should not dream of insisting. But you see for yourself the sort of hill it is, and you know what happened at Bristol. If you like to sit in the car and apply the brakes, I will walk alongside with the log. But if the car got away from you, I should never forgive myself."

" Oh, too much palaver ! " cried Muriel. " Come on ! " And she started down the hill with her unwieldy burden.

I kept the Flick well in hand, doing about two miles an hour. Several cars passed us, going comparatively gaily, but they were powerful vehicles with good brakes. Besides, their drivers probably knew every inch of the hill.

" We ought to rechristen this car ' The Snail ' ! " called Muriel, waiting for me to overtake her.

" Log ! " I shouted, letting the Flick out a little, Muriel flung the log in front of the wheels, and we pulled up with such a jerk that I was half thrown from my seat.

"There you are!" I said triumphantly. "What did I tell you?"

"What are we going to do now?"

"I must back a little to release the log. Then you roll it a few yards down the hill and I'll run into it again."

"Magnificent! Are we to go all down the hill like that?"

"I see no other way, my dear."

"Can't you get two wheels in the ditch and travel down?"

"It sounds risky, but I'm willing to try anything that will please you."

"Oh, don't shove all the responsibility on me! Men always do that!"

"I wonder where they learnt it?"

"Are we going to stop here all day scrapping? We shall never get home at this rate, and we've only got about five pounds left."

"Four-ten," I corrected.

"Well, four-ten, then. And at least one more night on the road. Oh, let the blooming thing go and chance it!"

"Very well, my dear. Are you going to ride or walk?"

"What do you think?" And she hopped into her place.

I put the Flick into reverse and backed away from the log. Then I slipped quickly into first, jammed on both brakes, and the descent recommenced. I think all might have gone well had I not inadvertently driven right over the log instead of just avoiding it. The jerk released the pressure on the brakes for a moment, and the Flick thus

acquired an impetus which I felt at once was beyond my control. In a word, *she was off!*

Not so very fast at first, but gaining speed all the time. I have said that the hill bends in the middle, and the village really begins at the bend. The question was, could I round the bend or should I dash into the cottages on the left hand side of the road?

" Steady ! " said Muriel.

I did not reply. I needed all my breath and energy for what I was doing— or trying to do. The pace increased. It was pretty obvious now that something must happen pretty soon. . . .

I saw the frightened women snatching up their children and running into their cottages. The Flick began to lurch, the surface being very bad and sloping sharply at the corner.

" You'll never do it ! " cried Muriel.

I did not. I charged straight at the palings in front of a cottage garden, carried them away like matchwood, rushed into the garden all among the stately hollyhocks, and pulled up in the very doorway of a dear little nook called " Sweet Hope."

CHAPTER XVII

HOW THE HONEYMOON ENDED

MURIEL said afterwards that they called that cottage "Sweet Hope" because they were always hoping for a car to run into it. She said the palings gave way so easily for the simple reason that they were only stuck about two inches into the ground. In fact, the dear girl made out that the inhabitants of "Sweet Hope" practically lived on accidents such as ours, and she firmly believed that they went up every night and dug up the roadway to keep the corner nice and dangerous.

I argued that human nature was not as bad as all that, especially in such a sweet, simple, rustic, unsophisticated spot as Chideock. This made Muriel laugh.

"Two quid," was her comment.

"We might have been killed, my dear."

"Two quid."

"And, after all, we did destroy a lot of holly-hocks."

"Two quid."

It was now absolutely imperative that we should not spend more than one more night on the road. Muriel had got through all the money her father sent her, and my store was reduced to two-pounds-

ten. Then there was always the chance, of course, that we might have another accident.

After leaving Chideock the road was nice and level, so we made up for lost time. We were about six miles from Dorchester, and I was telling Muriel some rather exciting facts about the Roman wall, when the "Fast Lady," if you please, got slower and slower and finally stopped! There was nothing hurried or dignified about it; she simply faded out, so to speak.

"Petrol," said my wife, but it was not petrol. I had filled up before leaving Lyme Regis.

I got down and opened the bonnet. There was nothing whatever inside it except the engine and a few flies. The flies, of course, had perished, and were merely adhering to the lid.

The piece of road on which the Flick had chosen to come to rest was as lonely as the road from Bampton to South Molton. There was not a house or cottage in sight; not a labourer working in the fields; not a dog or a hen or a rabbit. One fact was in our favour, and only one; the road sloped a little in the direction of Dorchester.

"What are we going to do?" asked Muriel.

"If you don't object, my dear, I think we'll push."

"Push? Push what?"

"The car, my love. The road slopes a little, as you can see. If we push, the engine may start or there may be quite a good hill round the corner."

So Muriel got down and we proceeded to push the "Fast Lady" along the side of the road. It was a hot morning, and she was heavier than I had expected. Still, progress was progress. Every

quarter of a mile we stopped to rest and cool off somewhat.

"How far is it to Dorchester?" asked Muriel.

"Only six miles, my love."

"Have we got to push this beastly thing six miles?"

"Oh, no, darling! I don't think we could."

"This is the worst bit of fun we've had yet," muttered the dear girl.

We got her a mile. At the end of that distance the road began to ascend, and it was too much to expect Muriel to push her up-hill. So we sat down by the roadside and waited.

Several cars were good enough to stop. Everybody flooded the carburettor. It didn't make any difference to them that the thing was already swimming with petrol. They just took hold of the needle and rammed it up and down, and then swung the handle, and then said "Funny!" and then got into their own cars and drove off.

One gentleman, a very nice man indeed, tall and aristocratic, with the air of a squire or lord, offered to give us a tow into Dorchester. But as he had no rope, and I had only a thin piece of string, he just flooded the carburettor and went off like the rest. Really, people on the road are extraordinarily kind.

The only person who passed without pulling up was a man on a motor-bike, and he was going so fast that we thought he hadn't seen us at all. I mean, he was a speck in the distance one moment, a horrid apparition the next, and nothing but a disgusting smell the next. Sixty miles an hour at the very least.

"Cad!" said Muriel, but she was wrong. That man *had* seen us, and as soon as he could stop his machine he turned round and came back! He was dressed like a diver or a Martian, so you may imagine my astonishment when he pulled off his helmet and said quietly, "'Ow do, Mr. Rabbidge?"

It was Ted! Ted on the way to see his aunt! The original and only Ted! Ted in the nick of time!

"Good gracious!" I exclaimed, and we both wrung him by the hand. Then we turned to the Flick.

"Trouble?" asked Ted.

"She won't go," I explained. "We've pushed her a mile, and still she won't go."

"Won't she fire?"

"She won't do anything."

Ted flooded the carburettor and swung the handle with astonishing ferocity. "The 'Fast Lady,'" in reply, simply spat at him. Ted did not mind. He took a half-smoked cigarette from behind his ear, and a box of matches from his trouser pocket. We might have been at Milton & Poppett's garage.

"Wot yew bin doin' ter this bonnet?" inquired Ted, staring very hard at it.

"Well, as a matter of fact, a cartload of stones fell on it."

"Cartload o' wot?"

"Flints. At a place called Helston, in Cornwall. Splendid Cornish flints."

"Fell on it?"

"Yes. They were unloading them, you see, and we were just behind."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" murmured Ted, and

scratched the top of his head with his little finger.
 " Yew've 'ad a run fer yer money, then ? "

" We've been to Land's End," we replied in chorus.

" Go on ! "

" We have, really. And we dashed into a cottage about two hours ago."

" Some motorin'," said Ted, unmoved.

He then got to work, taking out bits of the engine and putting them in his mouth. Muriel seemed quite fascinated by the sight, but it made me feel ill. So much oil, I am sure, cannot be good for motor mechanics.

He soon had her going again, and refused payment. So Muriel made him take all her cigarettes, which seemed to embarrass him, the reason being that he never used a perfectly new cigarette.

The last we saw of him was a speck in the distance. I think his aunt lived eighty miles off and was expecting him to midday dinner.

A good fellow, Ted.

Yes, and a mascot to us, for we reached Bourne-mouth without further mishap. Our main anxiety was now " ways and means." We had to pay for dinner, bed, breakfast, and the morrow's expenses out of two-pound ten. It is useless for people to tell me that motoring is not expensive. It is, very. Especially when you are not an expert.

I pulled up at an hotel in the middle of the town and went to the office.

" Have you," I said, removing my hat, " a double room for to-night ? "

" We have nothing till Christmas," was the cold answer.

" Oh ! Could you advise me where to apply ? "

" You won't get a room in Bournemouth. You might try the ' Sandown.' It's the only chance. I heard they had one room. Shall I ring them up for you ? "

I accepted the offer and secured the room. We drove out to the " Sandown."

My heart failed me as we entered the magnificent grounds. It was all rocks and flowers and smooth turf and sea-views. As for the hotel itself, it was all sun-blinds, and mullioned windows, and men in livery, and maids in little lace aprons, and the flower of English aristocracy in dinner-jackets.

" What a nice place ! " cried Muriel.

" What a nice price ! " I thought.

We went to the office. I don't know how Muriel felt, but I know my knees were trembling.

Yes, it was quite true they had a double room—a sheer accident. The price for the night, including baths, would be thirty-five shillings. That left us fifteen, and we were still over a hundred miles from home !

" Dinner," said the head-waiter, " will be at eight o'clock, sir."

I thanked him, and crept up the stairs after Muriel.

" This is what I call posh," said Muriel.

It was a lovely room. I had never seen such a lovely room. It had casement windows looking over the lawns and sea. There were two sumptuous beds, and a basin with silver taps and hot and cold water. Royalty might have slept in this room. I dare say Royalty had !

" What are we going to do about dinner ? " I asked Muriel.

"Eat it, I suppose," she replied.

"Not here," I told her. "The dinner is eight-and-six each. I saw a notice in the hall. That makes seventeen shillings. We have fifteen in the world, and all these people to tip, and petrol to buy, and the garage to pay for, and meals on the road to-morrow."

"But, my dear lad, we must have some food! We only had biscuits for lunch!"

"We'll wait till they're all in at dinner, and then slip out and go to some cheap place. I'm very sorry, my dear, but it can't be helped. It was running into that wretched cottage that did it."

"Two quid," observed Muriel.

We sneaked out of the royal apartment and the palatial hotel and went to a ham-and-beef shop. Some day, I vowed to myself, I would bring dear Muriel back to this very place, and we would have the very same room, and the best of everything.

It was a shame to go to sleep in a bed costing thirty-five shillings for the night. I wanted to lie awake and appreciate the luxury of it, and listen to the splash of the private waves breaking on the hotel private rocks. But even as I was thinking of all this, I fell asleep.

Muriel went first to the bath-room in the morning, and came back full of excitement.

"It's the most marvellous bath-room I ever saw!" she declared. "As big as our dining-room at home, with a huge bath, warm sea water, and a shower. The maid showed me how to work the shower, but I forgot, so I didn't have one."

"I shall have one. I mean to get my money's worth out of this place."

The bath-room was not very far from our room. The bath had a sort of canopy at one end, which, of course, was the shower. How foolish of Muriel not to use it !

I had a splendid bath, and then stood up and turned on the shower. The water rushed out with great force, and hit me on the head so hard that I fell flat down in the bath and might easily have been drowned. Luckily, I kept my nerve, and clambered once more to my feet.

"About time to turn you off, old chap !" I said, speaking to the shower ; and I proceeded to do so. Unfortunately, I had forgotten which tap was which, and the water came out even faster than before. The bath was very nearly full, and it was clear I must do something or the hotel would be swamped.

But what to do ? I could not ring for the maid, having no dressing-gown. I had slipped across from the bedroom in my pyjamas.

I pulled up what I took to be the plug, but it was a weird patent affair, and nothing seemed to happen. The water, by this time, was absolutely level with the top of the bath !

There was a fixed basin in the room, similar to the one in our bedroom. There was also a can, evidently used for carrying hot water to the bedrooms. I seized this can, dipped it in the bath, tore across the room and flung the water into the basin. If I kept on doing this very rapidly, I thought, I might get the water down to a reasonable level and then send Muriel to find a maid.

At first it seemed to answer, but it was hard work ! The room, by this time, was full of steam, and twice

I fell with the can and might have hurt myself very much indeed. And still the wretched shower poured down and down !

At last there came a knocking at the door.

" You can't come in ! " I yelled, for I had nothing on, and I had noticed that all these maids could open any door with keys that dangled from their waists.

" Are you all right in there ? " asked a voice—a male voice.

Thank heaven ! I dashed to the door and opened it. The man outside was, I suppose, a valet.

" Quick ! " I shouted. " Turn it off ! "

He did it in a twinkling ! As for me, I wrapped myself in a towel, and sank into a chair. I was nearly swooning with fatigue and fright. Never again will I tamper with these strange contrivances.

" You look pale," said Muriel. " Was the water too hot ? "

" There was too much of it," I gasped.

" Too much of it ? I don't understand."

" I'll explain later. Let's get out of this hotel and have some breakfast. I think I may be starving."

" My dear Leonard, we can't possibly leave the hotel without breakfast. What will they think ? "

" I don't care what they think. Breakfast is four-and-six—I saw the price on the bath-room wall. Two breakfasts—nine shillings. We've got to pay thirty-five shillings for the room and two baths—mine was worth ten pounds—three shillings for morning tea, three shillings for the garage, half-a-crown for the chambermaid, sixpence for the garage man. We spent one-and-fourpence on ham and

beef last night, so we shall have four-and-eightpence left to feed us all day and take us to London. It's pretty clear that we can't have breakfast in the hotel."

" I'll pawn a ring," said Muriel.

" No ! It's unlucky to pawn a ring on a honeymoon."

" Then you must pawn your watch."

" It's only a silver one. They wouldn't give me more than five shillings for it. I wish I'd borrowed some money from Ted."

" You can't start your married life by borrowing money from Ted. What are you doing now ? "

" Putting the sugar in my pocket. We've paid for it, and lump sugar, they say, is very sustaining."

We drove out of those beautiful grounds with exactly four-and-eightpence in hand. The garage-man was very dissatisfied with his sixpence, and the head-waiter, who had done nothing except tell me that dinner would be at eight o'clock, presented the bill on a silver salver and went as white as a sheet when I picked up all the change. Why should I pay him for nothing ? Nobody ever paid me for doing nothing, and I'm not half as well off as a head-waiter in a place like that. Why, I saw one man give him ten shillings for saying it was a fine morning.

Misfortunes never come singly. How true that is ! Truer than any of the nice proverbs, such as that every cloud has a silver lining. What silver lining is there to being hanged ?

In Bournemouth I got my first puncture. You may not have noticed it, but I had been all those

miles and never had any trouble with my tyres. I got it at Bournemouth.

It was in a wide street with tramlines. We were driving along, Muriel keeping a look-out for a small shop where we could breakfast, when I suddenly discovered that the "Fast Lady" would not keep straight. Tug at the wheel as I might, she *would* go to the left. So I pulled up and got out, to find the front near wheel as flat as a pancake!

"That's torn it!" pronounced Muriel, gloomily. "Bang goes our four-and-eightpence."

"Not at all, my dear. I have a spare wheel. All I do is to jack her up and change the wheel."

"Can you do that?"

"Well, I've seen Ted do it. I watched him very narrowly."

To get at the tools we had to remove all the luggage from the car, and this caused some confusion. One old gentleman fell over my suit-case which I had placed for a moment on the pavement, and he said some very nasty things about the honourable sport of motoring. And a lot of small boys, and nursemaids with babies, gathered round to see me work.

I found the jack, and put it under some portion of the framework. I then wound up the Flick until the wheel was clear of the road. Just as I had done this a policeman came along and said I was impeding the traffic, so I had to unwind her again and push the car, on a flat tyre, up a side street. Muriel carried the luggage, and all the small boys and the nursemaids followed.

It was a warm morning, and I was feeling the need of food, so I sent Muriel to buy some buns

and ginger-beer, giving her two shillings for the purpose.

I now jacked up the car once more, and tried to remove the wheel, but being free of the road it kept turning round, and a small boy suggested I should get on better if I loosened the nuts first and jacked up the car afterwards. I remembered that this was what Ted had done, so I unwound her for the second time and loosened all the nuts.

I then jacked her up for the third time, and tried to pull off the wheel. But it would not come, so a man who had been looking on offered assistance. I felt this would cost money, but I had to accept, and we both tugged at the wheel until it came off quite suddenly, and we fell heavily on to the pavement, knocking down several small boys and nearly killing a baby.

The next thing was to fit the spare wheel in place of the one removed. I extracted it from its resting-place, and tried, with the help of the strange man, to fit the beastly thing on to the sticking-out bits. But it would not fit ! Gradually it was borne in on me that it would never fit !

" This ain't the spare wheel for this car," said the man.

" But I bought it with the car," I protested.

" Maybe you did, but it wasn't never meant for this car. Anyone can see that. It belongs to some other car."

O faithless Ted ! O false Lindsay Mountford ! O perfidious 'Arry ! In the language of the sporting press, they had sold me a dog ! Here was I with a flat wheel, no spare, two-and-eightpence, no wife, and a hundred miles from home !

I dismissed the crowd. I stood on the step of the car and said, "This wheel will not go on. There is nothing more to see. Will you kindly disperse as we are about to have our breakfast?"

Reluctantly, they moved off, leaving me with the strange man. To him I said, "I thank you, sir, for your help. I would reward you if I could, but the fact is I have run short of money. Good morning."

And then the strangest incident of all happened. The man said:

"Why don't you sell the car for what she'll fetch?"

"Certainly," I replied bitterly. "Will you buy it?"

"How much?" inquired the man, looking the "Fast Lady" well over.

"One hundred pounds," I answered.

"Give you fifty," said the man.

"But I've only had her about six weeks."

"It's all she's worth. I should scrap the body and turn her into a light lorry for carrying milk. I can pay you cash because I was going into the town to buy something similar."

A violent agitation seized me.

"Will you split the difference?" I suggested in a shaking voice.

"Give you sixty-five," said the man.

I took it. And what do you think he did? He put that spare wheel on in two ticks, and drove off, leaving me on the pavement with sixty-five pounds and our luggage!

Just as he was out of sight, Muriel came round the corner in a taxi. She had pawned her bracelet-watch for ten pounds!

" Where's the car ? " she demanded.

" I've sold it ! "

" Sold it ? " she faltered. It was worth everything to have startled her at last.

" Yes ! I've sold it and got the money ! Put the luggage on the cab, driver, and we'll go and get this young lady's watch. Then drive us to the Sandown Hotel ! I'm going to finish up my honeymoon in style ! Hop in, old girl ! Drive like the devil, driver ! "

I flung myself on to the seat of the taxi and kicked my legs in the air. Off we went ! I had still a little of my holiday left, I had sixty-five pounds in my pocket, and a sweet little wife who had been astonished into catching at her breath !

" Mind the buns ! " said Muriel.

" Damn the buns ! " I shouted, and flung them out of the window. " We're going to have two breakfasts at four-and-six, and you see me make those blooming servants jump ! Kiss your little devil of a husband ! "

EVERYBODY PAYS

Clara Lehman was a little frightened when she received the request from the Tax Inspector to call at his office. As a dancer she did not earn very much, and she felt that she must be paying more than enough tax already.

But there was no need for Clara to have worried. Mr. Pillguard, the Inspector, was only trying to discover whether her employers were sending in the correct returns for her salary—and he actually found she had paid *too much*! But at the end of the interview he made a most astonishing request—for Henry Ellsworth Pillguard was the most confirmed of bachelors and not the sort of man to ask anything of a woman—he asked Clara if he might meet her that evening at the club where she worked.

Also by Stephen Graham

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EVERYBODY PAYS

By

STEPHEN GRAHAM



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Rat-Tat it went upon the lion's chin
"That hat, I know it," said the joyful girl.
"Taxes" he said. "And I shall not call again!"

THOMAS HOOD

Chapter One

CLARA LEHMAN was a little embarrassed, but conscious of innocence. She wished that the implied suspicion had been correct. How comforting it would have been to have had a secret income of a thousand a year! On that, after all, one could live happily in Paris and not be bothered with taxes. She had made out her return in a painstaking way. When she had written in her profession, 'Dancer,' she had felt slightly ashamed, as if it could not be thought that anyone who danced for a living could make a taxable income. Her friend Linda Bauer, who had a hat shop in Rupert Street, said that to tax a dancer was like taxing a butterfly or a grasshopper. 'But in this country,' she added, 'if they could make grasshoppers pay tax, they would.'

Clara Lehman kept accounts of a kind, in pencil, in her engagement diary. Like many Englishwomen she had a very definite idea of the amount she received but was a trifle vague about the amount she spent. The latter was complicated by the amount she borrowed and the amount that was borrowed from her. She totalled her fees and deducted her agent's commission and carried the net amount on to her income-tax form.

She had put down everything, except, of course, anything in the nature of a tip. When she had amused elderly gentlemen who had no claim on her attention beyond their custom at a club, she had sometimes netted an extra pound, put in her hands with exaggerated expression of admiration. And young bloods taking her to lunch in their smart cars had upon occasion run her round to Bond Street to buy her just what she wanted at the moment. But anything obtained in that way could not rightly be considered income. There is no schedule for windfalls.

She had nothing to fear, and yet she had felt 'all fussed' when she received the request of H.M. Inspector that she would call at his office bringing with her a full, detailed and certified account of her professional income. The word 'certified' was especially annoying. Did it mean that she must pay an accountant's fee? She decided, in any case, to overlook that. She could not be forced to hand her engagement diary to an accountant. 'They will assess you at double the amount of your return and then make you go into court to prove that you make less,' said Linda, who had had some experience of the kind. Linda advised Clara to wear her oldest clothes when she went to see the inspector, and look as if she lived next door to the poorhouse. But Clara said that girls who looked poor and downtrodden always got bullied. She dressed herself as smartly as she could, and so as not to be tired or flustered by walking to the office, she took a cab.

At her best Clara Lehman looked something of an

enchantress, and could have posed as Circe or Medea; at her worst she looked like a sick kitten. She was between those two states as she sat in the taxi looking afresh at the official letter, and wondering how she would fare at the hands of H. E. Pillguard, who signed his name in thin blue ink in the weak scrawl of the man who dashes off fifty signatures at the end of the day. She peered at her face in the little mirror of her bag, and then dabbed on a little more powder. Do what she could, she had been unable to remove that expression as of a withheld tear. She was something between a brunette and a blonde, a stately girl with dark chestnut hair. She was not tall, but looked an inch or so taller than she was, especially when she was dancing. She dressed to suit her hair and her large brown eyes. Her French coat of close-spun black and brown had a hard rock-like texture which threw into relief the soft whiteness of her neck and throat.

Mr. Pillguard, who had made an appointment with her for three o'clock on this murky October afternoon, was in every respect a contrast to his expected visitor. His face was white from the smoking of innumerable cigarettes. His eyes were sunken by what he called 'concentrating,' by staring at and penetrating involved statistics. To him, all statistics were involved; no statement of income was as simple as it looked. And to say that he was a faithful servant of the Inland Revenue would be to underestimate his service. He was its slave. He was clad in official black, not far removed in style from the garb of an undertaker. His close-cut hair was

black and thinning; he had a thick untrimmed black moustache which at times closed entirely over his lower lip. He must have been lanky in his youth, but at forty-five he had a slight stoop from office work, and this stoop made him look a little more substantial and interesting.

Miss Lehman stood at the Inquiry barrier; it looked like the baggage counter at a railway station. Her good looks and smart appearance made no impression on the clerks at their tables; they did not even glance at her from the corners of their eyes. A young fellow came forward, scanned Mr. Pillguard's letter, and proceeded to look out the documents in the case. 'Please take a seat,' said he absent-mindedly; 'Mr. Pillguard will be disengaged in a moment.'

She took a hard seat and stared into the impersonal blank of a tax office. She looked about for a copy of *The Lady* or *Vogue*, but the only reading matter was a bound copy of the Income Tax Acts which was lying open on the counter, and was probably not intended for whiling away the time. A junior clerk brought tea on a tea-tray for his seniors, and then put his head in at Mr. Pillguard's room, where a somewhat unpleasant altercation seemed to be going on. A very emphatic voice was contending with a voice that was conversational and cadging. The tea clerk was evidently not wanted, for he withdrew his head in a hurry. Still Miss Lehman waited, and grew more nervous and looked in her glass again and powdered her nose again. Then she lit a cigarette.

The clerk who had scrutinised her letter glanced upward when she struck the match, and then, as if a little conscience-stricken, sauntered into Mr. Pillguard's room.

'The female taxpayer is still waiting,' he whispered.

Mr. Pillguard nodded. The clerk went out again. 'Won't keep you waiting long now,' said he to Miss Lehman with a constrained official smile. But hardly had he resumed his seat when a bell rang imperatively and he got up again.

As he entered Mr. Pillguard's room again, Miss Lehman was startled to hear a harsh voice. It was that of the inspector. She saw him standing at his desk. His visitor was hastily collecting some papers into a black bag.

'Show that man the door!' said Mr. Pillguard with withering contempt. 'I'll see the female taxpayer now.'

'I think, if you don't mind, I'll just clear the air a little,' said the inspector to Miss Lehman, who, looking more than a little troubled, was waiting to be asked to sit down.

Mr. Pillguard, with both hands, flung upward the massive office window. Then he returned to his desk and murmured: 'If there's one thing I can't stick, it's when a taxpayer comes in here and offers me a bribe. Do they think they're in America? Won't you take a seat, Miss Lehman? I see your real name is Smith, Dora Smith. That seems to me quite as good a name as Clara Lehman. Do you receive any other income as Dora Smith?'

'Clara Lehman was my mother's name. I took it because she taught me to dance.'

'You've no income as Smith?'

'No.'

'Right! You've brought the full statement of your professional earnings with you? Thank you! Would you like a cigarette? Make yourself at home, Miss Lehman. Would you like a cup of tea? Bring in another cup of tea, Mr. Shanks.'

Mr. Pillguard stared with hooded eyes at the sheet of violet-coloured paper on which in very black blotchy ink Miss Lehman had set down her figures for the year. Clara watched him furtively as he faintly underlined in pencil several of the names of establishments and hostesses who had paid her fees.

'This is largely a formality,' said Mr. Pillguard, looking up. 'It is quite possible I may be able to save you a small amount in tax.'

He put the paper aside for a moment, and began to nibble a petit beurre biscuit and sip at his cup of thick, well-stewed tea.

Clara Lehman felt much more at her ease. The interview had taken a turn which she had not expected. She concluded that she had nothing to fear from Mr. Pillguard, and that he was not as formidable as he seemed on first sight. She surmised he was a married man with children, and must be quite different and human in his home. She had a way of smiling which invited sympathy and help, and she smiled engagingly at the inspector.

'I was not able to have the accounts certified,' said she. 'That costs money, and as you see I am poor and I have to keep up an expensive wardrobe.'

'When we have gone over the figures and got them into order you can certify them yourself,' said Mr. Pillguard. 'I don't suppose they are added up correctly. No artist can add . . . not if she be a good artist,' he added, chuckling to himself. 'Now tell me frankly, how is business? Falling off a little?'

'Oh yes, I get asked to take less because of hard times. It's a shame. I don't mind when a lady who is giving a party pleads supertax. She does not charge her guests admission. But there's a class in England which no taxes seem to hit, lots who still have money. You see them every night at the smart restaurants and clubs.'

'Go on, that's very interesting,' said the inspector, staring at her rigidly.

'I mean business is not so bad. I don't see why my fees should be cut. Some of the managers say to me: "Yes, but what opportunities you have on the side with our rich clientele. We might ask commission on what you make out of our valuable introductions." I think that is humiliating, but I have to swallow my pride.'

Mr. Pillguard nodded appreciatively. It appealed to him that she was 'going straight.' 'I know them,' he said. 'I've had experience of them. There are some ugly customers among them. It must be difficult for you at times. Do you go unattended to these places, or do you have something in the nature of a chaperon?'

'Not always. At present, no. I'm dancing at Celes-

tine's, at ten-thirty and again at eleven-thirty. Between the acts, unless someone invites me to his table, I'm at a loose end, up in the air, if you know what I mean.'

'Quite.'

'But if I have a gentleman friend and he comes about ten and takes a table, my position is much better, and it impresses the management. Sometimes on the strength of that alone I get my contract renewed. There's someone to lead the applause. That means a lot. And I do not have to entertain some other customer who is perhaps very drunk and inclined to be disgusting. Do you mind if I smoke another cigarette?'

'Celestine's reopened during the financial year ended April last? No, do have one of mine. Celestine's? Simnel Street? That's in my district; they ought really to have had a form. I must see they get one. So you go there unattended? I have a question to ask you, but I'll leave it till we've finished with your return. There's not much in this. We're more interested in who pays you than in catching you out in some small amount. You see they might enter your fee in their expenses as ten guineas while all the while they were only paying you five. We have to watch them. Your account is valuable as a cross reference. We don't bother a taxpayer much till we find that he has been falsifying some petty details and then we get on his track in thoroughgoing fashion. Then I get him on the carpet.'

'Yes, you can be quite cruel,' whispered the dancer.

'Not at all, only just, you'll see,' said the inspector.
'Let me tot up these figures. A pound too much. I knew

you could not add. Just add it up again and agree. Yes? Well now, you've forgotten all about your expenses. How much do you spend in a year in taxis going to and from the places where you dance? I think I could allow three pounds in respect of that. And special costumes, you dance in costume? Would ten pounds cover that? And then railway expenses . . . I see Maidenhead?'

'Yes, I had a Maidenhead engagement in the summer. I went down by train sometimes. Sometimes I was taken in a car.'

'Well, I'll put down two pounds for that. Anything else? No?'

Mr. Pillguard was busy with his pencil, and Miss Lehman leaning slightly forward followed him sympathetically.

'That makes fifteen pounds we can knock off,' said the inspector. 'It's not much, but it's something. Just agree these figures with me and then sign them. Thank you! You'll receive a confirmation of this by first post tomorrow morning. Keep it. It will be useful when you submit your accounts next year.'

'I'm ever so grateful. I had no idea one was ever called upon to pay less,' said Miss Lehman gushing. She got up, preparing to leave. 'And the question you were going to ask me?' she hazarded.

Mr. Pillguard seemed slightly embarrassed.

'It's an impertinence,' said he in a gruff voice. 'And strictly unofficial.'

Miss Lehman waited anxiously.

'Not at all,' said she. 'Ask me, I shan't mind.'

'I am curious,' said the inspector, drawing triangles on his blotter. 'But it occurred to me while you were talking. How would you like an escort one night to Celestine's?'

Clara Lehman was surprised, but she nodded assent. She looked closely at the face of the inspector as if to observe what sort of man he was. 'Tonight,' she said. 'Tonight if you like. Just give my name at the door. I'll tell them I have a guest. I hope you'll find it interesting. And may I say again, thank you, you've been very kind.'

She put her hand in his and let it linger.

Chapter Two

HENRY ELLSWORTH PILLGUARD was surprised at himself. He was a man who lived without women, and found a bachelor's existence perfectly satisfactory and adequate. He was not entirely at a loss in the company of women, but did not seek adventures with them. It was far from his custom and practice to seek further intimacy with the females whom he called up for interview.

On his way home from the office he made a tour of his tax district, varying it as was his custom, to take in new streets. It was a busy commercial district, and the fact that he knew 'to a fraction of a penny' how many of the concerns were doing, gave him a certain satisfaction. His mechanical reaction to the imposing façade of Luage's department store was the silent remark that Lord Luage, who had secretly appropriated a large amount of capital to cover his losses on the Stock Exchange, ought really to be in 'chokee.' 'He'll be for the high jump one of these days.'

In his two-room service flat Mr. Pillguard preserved a decorum consistent with his life. As he considered himself a gentleman and a man of family connections he habitually dressed for dinner.

The sparse meal of mutton chops, greens and fried potatoes which the house waiter brought in at seven was pleasantly garnished by a bottle of Margaux. It was not much of a dinner for a man who had taken the trouble to dress, but Mr. Pillguard sorted out the right key from the bunch in his pocket, and from a box in his bureau drawer extracted a handsome corona. Solaced by a long cigar, he began to read with close attention the financial columns of the evening papers. This was his way of resting and recuperating after the day's work. At ten o'clock he was as fresh as when he had begun routine in the morning. Seven hours' wrestling with the taxpayers demanded a quiet space of this kind if he was to enjoy himself during the rest of the evening.

The doorman at Celestine's was an old soldier wearing a dozen medals, one of which he had obtained for bravery in the field, while others he had bought and added to make himself more valuable at the entrance to an expensive night-club. When a man with twelve medals runs to get you a taxi you give him a bigger tip than a man with merely three.

'How much do you get a week?' asked Mr. Pillguard.

'Two pounds,' said the soldier, and smirked apologetically.

'I suppose you pick up ten shillings a night in tips all the same?'

'Not so much as that.'

'Discharged soldier, I suppose?' Mr. Pillguard peered at his decorations with the friendly gaze of a connoisseur

of medals. 'They show a fine record. Sergeant Burstwaite, eh? I hope you get a decent little pension. Well, everything helps. You may be a richer man than I am for all I know.'

The sergeant, who was used to being jollied about his medals and the fortune he was supposed to be amassing, gave him a regimental smile, but Mr. Pillguard made a pencil note of his name as he went up in the lift. 'Now, when England needs every penny,' he murmured to himself, but he did not finish the expression of his thought, for he found himself in the outer hall of Celestine's facing the row of gambling machines which some early visitors were already playing. As he had not seen these in operation before he began to watch the guests winning and losing money before he had disposed of his hat and coat. Two expensive-looking blondes were busily putting in shillings which their male escorts found for them.

'Wonderful machines,' said he to the cloakroom attendant. 'How much do they win in a night?'

'I've known one of them to earn as much as five pounds,' said the attendant, a smart boy in sky-blue livery. 'They can't lose.'

'They ought to pay income tax at five shillings in the pound. Twenty-five shillings a night for the revenue might help to take a penny off beer.'

'Not much hope of that, sir,' said the attendant knowingly.

'Really,' murmured the inspector, returning to the gamblers, 'these machines ought to have a mechanical

adjustment to safeguard twenty-five per cent for the revenue.'

Miss Lehman had not arrived, but her guest was accorded a good table to the right of the stage and a large panier of flowers and ferns. The band was crooning a slow dance and six couples were on the floor. They were people who had dined at the club. The main patronage arrived after eleven, from the theatres. Mr. Pillguard, having ordered a liqueur brandy, proceeded to examine the faces of the guests. But he came to the conclusion that he had not encountered any of them before. He tried to assess them mentally.

A card on the table indicated the 'attractions': Johnny Stevens, violinist; Mlle Malinova (MASHA) and Prince George Chenokidze; Clara Lehman, danseuse. There was some flutter among the guests when Masha and her elegant accompanist arrived. Clara Lehman came in on their heels, but no one seemed to pay any attention to her. She recognised Mr. Pillguard at a glance and came straight over to him.

She stood holding his hand, but it was only for a moment. 'I must go and dress,' said she. 'In a minute Stevens will be playing. After him comes a fox-trot and then my turn.' She looked round the room. 'Very few people,' she added. 'But I come on again later, and then it will be full.' Mr. Pillguard nodded. He did not show any pleasure at her arrival, did not fuss round her or talk in a loud voice, but behaved with the quiet discretion of a detective or a conspirator. Masha joined Clara and they went together to the dressing-room:

there was only one. Mr. Pillguard was left with Prince Chenokidze, who upon invitation proved to be delighted with the prospect of a liqueur.

‘Your Highness lost everything in the revolution?’ inquired Mr. Pillguard.

‘But I have never been happier in my life.’

‘I suppose your family did save something from the wreck, scrape along somehow, eh?’

‘My family? What do you think? My mother is a dressmaker. My aunt takes in washing. My elder brother is an agent for coal and goes round touting for orders. My young sister is somebody’s mistress. That’s what revolution means, my dear sir.’

Mr. Pillguard’s black moustache closed over his lower lip nervously. Was he chuckling? It was difficult to see.

‘I see you are not ashamed to admit that your family are in such straits.’

‘We Russians are a people without shame. What is the use of shame? It stands in the way when one wants to pick up a penny that is lying in the mud. Mlle Malinova out of the twelve guineas a week she earns allows me four, and out of that I pay for the hire of this suit. And I have a room with a piano in a back street in Pimlico. I don’t feel ashamed. As I said, I have never been as happy before.’

‘A good tale,’ murmured Mr. Pillguard, and he felt constrained to offer the prince a cigarette.

‘And you?’ said Chenokidze. ‘But don’t tell me. Let me guess. You are merciless; you are inquisitive; you have a passion for detail; conventional; routine;

reserved. I should say you were a solicitor. Am I right?’

‘No, I’m only a humdrum Civil Servant,’ said Pillguard, wrinkling his brow. It did not please him to have his character read so rapidly. ‘Ah,’ he added with relief. ‘I see your partner is beckoning to you to come to her. Glad to have had this little chat with Your Highness. I shall be seeing you again.’ The prince crept languidly past Stevens, who was sawing on his violin to an inattentive company.

Mr. Pillguard automatically rang the bell on his table as if to call the next taxpayer waiting for an interview. He caught the eye of the manager, who came smilingly towards him. Soon he had engaged him in a conversation about his profits.

Clara Lehman in a trouser suit of orange silk with carnation brassière and necklet of pink coral was dancing to Spanish music, but Mr. Pillguard paid little attention till the conclusion of the number, when he clapped his hands vigorously. Clara got a good round of applause, better than on the night previously, and she recognised gratefully the value of a man to lead the cheers. Pillguard was looking at her directly, and the manager was also looking attentively and clapping.

Guests were now arriving plentifully, and there were twice as many as when Mr. Pillguard entered. The tables, one by one, were taken, and the dance floor became lively. Miss Lehman put on a wrap over her costume and came to sit with Mr. Pillguard. Then Masha sang her Ukrainian songs, which caused such

enthusiasm that the waiters were kept busy with renewed orders for drink. Clara was pleased with her escort. He praised her dancing warmly, and said she ought to insist on a higher fee. He looked much more prepossessing than at the office. His well-cut evening clothes suited him. The tobacco stains on his right hand were harmonised by a large gold ring. But for these tobacco stains and a certain wildness in his black moustache he was immaculate. He was quite unself-conscious, and that in a way is a charm in a man. And he did not show the least sign of beginning to make love to her, which was a relief. So many men felt they were called upon to pretend they were a little in love with a lady five minutes after they had met, and Clara was tired of that. She had had too much of it. Instead Mr. Pillguard plied her with questions about the guests, and one or two, seeing her look in their direction, nodded and smiled.

There were several men with whom Clara had danced on previous nights, and she knew they were now shy to come forward till she had at least danced one dance with her guest. But Mr. Pillguard did not dance. He said he much preferred to sit and talk. In answer to inviting glances Harry Squire, of Wolverhampton, and Lennox Arlington, a young dandy of independent means, came to the table and were introduced to Mr. Pillguard. Against their inclination they were inveigled into a discussion of the profits involved in backing horses and could not get a word in edgeways with the beautiful Clara. Mr. Pillguard ordered more drinks and

supper for two, and took out from an inside pocket three fine cigars. He was well supplied with these.

‘Five inches of this cigar represent tax,’ said he. ‘Three-quarters of that glass of cognac is tax. When the taxes on food are established we shall eat, drink and breathe indirect taxation.’

The subject did not interest the bookmaker, but he was uncomfortable because he had realised that Mr. Pillguard was interested in income tax, and he mentally labelled him as a ‘tax sleuth.’ There were such people about, he knew, a secret service of the Inland Revenue, collecting information about people’s incomes all the while and preparing unpleasant surprises for tax dodgers. He had exaggerated his winnings at the St. Leger to the extent of five hundred pounds, and now could have eaten his words. Mr. Arlington, on the other hand, had nothing to hide, and was frankly bored by the turn the conversation had taken. He got his £1,600 a year free of income tax from his trustees, and when at the moment of crisis the tax had been put up sixpence in the pound he had only lost fifty pounds, whereas the poor devils of teachers had had ten per cent deducted from their salaries, and still had to pay the increased income tax on what was left over. Or if he had been in the diplomatic service he would have had his salary docked and have had to make both ends meet in a foreign country with a smaller income of depreciated pounds. He thanked God tacitly that he did not have to earn his living. It came to him bounteously under his late uncle’s will. So there was no reason why he

should not indulge in a carefree dance with the beautiful Clara Lehman.

The orchestra had just started to play a tango, and he had actually turned to Clara to claim the dance when he was aware of another visitor to the table. An exceedingly fair man of middle stature stood bowing to Miss Lehman. He stood so that he ignored the rest of the company and kept his discreetly lowered gaze upon Miss Lehman so that, as if hypnotised, she rose, dropped her wrap and, nodding to the rest, accompanied him on to the dance floor.

Mr. Pillguard glanced at them in momentary annoyance and turned to continue his conversation, but the other two were gazing at Clara and her partner. It was obvious at once that they were in a class by themselves as far as dancing the tango was concerned.

‘By Jove, these two can dance all right,’ exclaimed Harry Squire.

‘Who is he?’ growled the inspector. It seemed to him the height of bad manners that someone should have come and taken his partner away without reference to him.

‘Oh, I think I remember him,’ said Mr. Arlington. ‘He’s not much more than a male partner. Damn’ check, I call it.’

‘I’m glad you think so. I quite agree,’ said Mr. Pillguard.

‘He’s a gigolo with a little hidden capital.’

Mr. Pillguard pricked up his ears.

‘He used to run the Piccadilly Salon. It had quite a

vogue at the time when one went and learned something new every season. He is supposed to have taught the Prince some of his best steps. But when he saw business was going to fall off he went into liquidation. They say he has a nice little bit tucked away somewhere, and intends to open up in a new place soon.'

As the tango was nearing its completion Mr. Goodge whispered to Miss Lehman.

'Why don't you come out of the rain?'

These were the first words he had spoken during the dance, and as they did not seem to bear much sense, Miss Lehman smiled weakly.

'I don't quite understand,' she murmured.

They were near some palms at the farther end of the dance floor. Mr. Goodge, when the dance finished, retired with her beyond the palms. There was a spontaneous outbreak of applause from the guests who had watched their dancing.

'Here is my card,' said Mr. Goodge. 'I think I may say without self-flattery that we make a pretty good combination. I've watched your dancing, and I am sure of it. I'd like to see more of you, if I could. I've a business proposition to put up to you. I believe we could do more together than we are doing singly. Also, I've a little capital which I would like to invest in dancing. Would you make an appointment to talk it over with me? They are calling on us for an encore. See, we have a success right off the bat.'

'I've nowhere to put your card,' said Clara, running her hand along the seam of her yellow trousers.

‘Never mind, drop it! Come along, they are calling for us.’

This time they had the floor to themselves, and danced the whole tango again as it ought to be danced, while everyone in the room watched them. It was like an extra number on the list of attractions, and Mr. Celestine was well pleased. The tango went much better than Miss Lehman’s *pas seul*. There is something of the fascination of the story of Beauty and the Beast in the tango. Tall handsome men do not tango well. The male must be a bit of a Basque, he should be short, ugly, aggressive, possessive, and his partner may be as lovely as she likes, but she must be entirely his. One person in the room did not at all relish the exhibition dance, and that was Mr. Pillguard, who silently voted Mr. Goodge a ‘very ugly customer.’

‘The Hyde Park, tomorrow at four?’ whispered Mr. Goodge.

Clara nodded.

Mr. Pillguard received her back amiably and jealously. The other two men returning to their respective tables were lavish in compliments. The waiter arrived with the supper he had held back. Masha and Chenokidze gave another turn. Mr. Pillguard did not listen to the Russian songs. He was a whit flurried, but he paid more attention to Clara Lehman, and she was grateful.

Chapter Three

AS CELESTINE's did not run their usual programme on Mondays, a petty economy on their part, Clara Lehman had that night free, and Mr. Pillguard had invited her to go with him to the theatre.

Thoughts of Clara were persistent in the inspector's mind on the day after his visit to the club. He had an appointment with the accountant to go over the figures of Silverman's pawnbroking business, an exceedingly complicated affair, because Silverman took refuge in an exaggerated illiteracy and submitted his ill-worded accounts in watery ink, much crossed out and blotted. On the ground that jewellery had become almost unsaleable Mr. Silverman had made a last-minute revaluation of his pledges, and had come to the conclusion that in many instances he had overlent. Mr. Pillguard had contended that with the depreciation of the pound sterling all gold and silver pledges had automatically risen in value. And there were several other points of variance. To his astonishment Mr. Pillguard found himself agreeing to accept Mr. Silverman's statement of his affairs. The reason was that as soon as he had got rid of the accountant he intended to

ring up Miss Lehman and inquire after her state of health.

That was absurd; of course her health was all right, and he did not telephone. But he could not concentrate. That being so, he called his typist from the next room and decided to dictate to her, and instruct her for the rest of the day. Miss Loob was a smart and discreet little brunette who greatly enjoyed dictation.

'Send memo 29d . . . b.f. in one week. . . . Tell Norwich 5 to buzz off; we're dealing with the case. . . . Send refresher. . . . Ah yes, convey to her that if her husband has slept under the same roof with her during the financial year ended, etc., the Board cannot regard her for revenue purposes as a *femme seule*, and she will accordingly be assessed together with her husband. You might send him a fresh form and ask him to fill in particulars of his wife's income. Got that? Right! . . . Taxpayer declares that owing to bad times he has been living on money transferred from deposit account. No previous reference to deposit account. Ask for a certificate from his bank stating the amount of interest accruing to him in respect of his deposit account during each of the financial years ended, etc. etc., respectively. . . . The new rector, "in answer to the plea for national economy I have sub-let part of the rectory during the past year." I doubt if he has the right. The rector taking in lodgers, that's too bad. A return should be made in Schedule B. Remind him he has not yet supplied the figures of his Easter offerings. . . .'

Mr. Pillguard dictated with a rapid-fire ferocity. One

person at least enjoyed it, and that was the little brunette, Angela Loob. She would have been perhaps a little dismayed and disillusioned had she known that the inspector's charming fierceness was partly caused by a determination on his part to rid his mind of the thought of a lady.

She was indeed surprised when he stopped the dictation to telephone and heard him inquiring whether Miss Lehman had slept well the night before. The lady at the other end was evidently in a hurry, or the conversation was cut off. After a few remarks that gave away no information Mr. Pillguard put up the receiver and scribbled something on his blotting-pad. 'That will do now,' said he. 'Bring me what letters you have for me to sign, as I'm going early this afternoon.'

Miss Loob hurriedly glanced at what he had written on his pad, and saw the words 'Hyde Park Hotel,' and surmised that he was going there to tea with Miss Lehman. Never before had she known him interrupt office work to go and have tea with a lady. As soon as the inspector left the building she turned up her previous correspondence with Miss Lehman, and realised that she had called the day before. 'Do you know,' she said to the other typist, Miss Agnew, 'the boss has gone to tea with a female taxpayer?'

But Miss Loob was wrong. Clara had gone to her rendezvous with Stanley Goodge, but Mr. Pillguard had gone in another direction to a different and safer type of company.

Jauntily swaying his well-furled umbrella, his bowler

hat set well on the crown of his head, he swung along at an easy pace to the offices of Newton Iredale, next to the Irving Theatre, which he controlled. He had not 'phoned to this very busy man because he had a standing invitation to play chess with him any afternoon after four. Pillguard walked in with assurance because he knew Iredale would be pleased to see him. He had not been to see him for some time, so the visit was likely to be an unusually pleasant surprise.

A distinguished-looking old man with grey hair was discussing business with a red-faced little fellow with a nose like the peg of a tectotum. Mr. Iredale looked up and turned from the dramatist, who had been vexing him for half an hour, to greet Pillguard with evident relief.

'Well, old man, this is a surprise. Where have you been hiding yourself? I was beginning to feel that I must have offended you in some way.'

'I'm not disturbing you, not cutting in in any way?'

'Not in the least. You know Mr. Nicholls, don't you, the author of *The Romantic Widow*, which has been playing to full houses right through the summer and autumn?'

The man with the midget nose was preoccupied with a MS. which he held before him, and did not seem to welcome the intrusion.

Mr. Iredale reached to a safe which was stacked with boxes of cigars. 'This is Mr. Pillguard. We have to furnish him regularly with a statement of all royalties

paid over to you,' said he, chuckling. 'Good man for you to know, Nicholls. Meet the Inland Revenue, which I bet you've been trying to evade most of your life.'

Mr. Nicholls unwillingly extended his hand.

'You wrote *The Romantic Widow*? Wonderful! I've always wanted to meet a dramatist in the flesh. I suppose you've made a fortune out of that play alone?'

'There he goes, Pillguard, always hot on the scent of the revenue. Have a cigar!'

'Frankly, Iredale, I don't see why the last act should be altered to improve Miss Fagin's part. It spoils the play. If she doesn't like it why not give it to someone else? She is not indispensable.'

'In connection with the theatre, Pillguard, everyone thinks himself indispensable. In my vague way, I do, too. That's our weakness. I suppose you've come for your usual queen's pawn?'

'Yes, I wouldn't mind having a dart at you.'

Mr. Iredale proceeded lazily to clear a space on his table for a chessboard.

Mr. Nicholls became crestfallen. He saw it was no good trying to ignore Mr. Pillguard. 'Connected with the taxes?' he asked. 'It's the only business worth being in nowadays. When is it going to stop? I don't believe it will stop till we have out and out Socialism in this country.'

'The Socialists won't abolish the income tax,' said the inspector.

'Socialism,' said Mr. Nicholls, taking up his hat and

manuscript, 'is a state in which all earnings are taken in taxes, but in return one is fed, clothed, housed, educated, nursed and buried without charge.'

Having delivered himself of this dictum the dramatist recovered his self-esteem, shook hands with Mr. Pillguard, hurriedly advised Mr. Iredale to 'think it over,' and bowed himself out.

'Thank Heaven,' said Mr. Iredale. 'Play white? But, I say, before we begin. You've been away so long. I didn't offend you in any way last time? If so, old man, I assure you it was quite unwittingly on my part. Did I?'

'Well, you did.'

'I thought I must have. Let's have it out now. What was it?'

'I thought it was a bit too much,' said Pillguard. 'We were playing chess, but after almost every move you got up to answer the telephone. I said to myself, "Hang it all, if you are going to play chess, play chess; if you want to conduct a business, conduct a business."''

The wrinkles on Mr. Iredale's fine brow ascended and descended.

'You are right. I remember now. It was rotten to leave you hanging in suspense as to my next move for five minutes at a time. But I'm glad you told me. Please accept my absolutely unreserved apology. Will you?'

'I will,' said Mr. Pillguard severely, concentrating his attention on getting each of his white pieces in the dead centre of its square. 'That's a good cigar.'

'I thought you might like it. I don't care so much for Clays myself. I prefer a dry cigar. If they're any good to you you can have the rest of the box.'

'You can spare it, Iredale?'

'Yes. I've enough cigars and cigarettes to start a shop. For some reason, everyone who wants to sell smokes in connection with my theatres feels constrained to send me samples. Very good of them.'

They were making the early moves of the Queen's Gambit, and the conversation was soon silenced by chess. Pillguard was a pertinacious player who strove not to win but to exchange and simplify. He loathed queens and bishops, but petted and advanced his pawns, trying always to bring about a dictatorship of the proletariat upon the chessboard. Iredale's weakness lay in his trying to remember what Dr. Alekhine had done upon similar occasion. And he always resigned prematurely, like a gentleman.

Despite telephone calls, generally from people trying to get free seats for some evening performance, he managed to place Mr. Pillguard in a serious dilemma this afternoon. The inspector's mind was not entirely on the game. He got up from the table and strode to the window to look out.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'if I take my mind right off it for a moment. I'll come back to it.'

Iredale secretly gloated, but was far from showing it. He answered another telephone call and refused free seats for *The Romantic Widow*. 'We're playing to a packed house every night,' said he. 'I'm sorry, but it

would simply mean making you a gift of the price of the seats. You do not want me to do that.'

Then Pillguard returned and made the best move he could think of. 'Dr. Alekhine would have taken one glance at the board and saved your game,' said Iredale, removing a major piece. 'You ought to resign now.'

But the inspector seemed set on playing the crippled game to the bitter end, hoping his opponent might make some mistake. Iredale was annoyed, and said he'd rather resign himself than continue a game which had become childish.

'No seats going for *The Romantic Widow*?' queried the inspector.

'None whatever.'

'All right, I resign. Couldn't you manage to do me a couple?'

Iredale scored a win in his pocket diary and was plainly pleased. He turned the board about to play a return match.

'For what night?' he asked. 'Monday, you say? I think I could manage Monday. Just a moment, I'll phone the box office.'

'Yes, that's all right. There'll be two seats for you at the office Monday night. Who are you taking, Starman?'

Pillguard expressed his gratitude and smiled self-consciously and mysteriously. 'I'm taking a lady,' said he.

Iredale looked into his face searchingly. 'That's new,' said he. 'Who is she?'

'She's a bit in your line. I'd like you to meet her.'

'Not an actress looking for a part?' asked Iredale warily.

'No, a dancer,' replied Pillguard with an air of triumph.

Iredale put his lips together to whistle, and blew out his breath. 'Karsavina, Lopokhova, eh what?'

'Something in that line; Clara Lehman; have you heard of her?'

Iredale was a little disappointed. 'Never,' said he, with an air of finality. And then he smiled jocularly. 'Careful, my boy, careful!' he added.

'I intend to be,' said Pillguard seriously. 'But you will come some evening. I'd like to ask you to dinner to meet her.'

'Certainly, I'll come,' said Iredale, 'if only to protect you.' And then both men concentrated upon their second game.

Chapter Four

CLARA LEHMAN lived on the top floor of a house in a busy little street. She entered through a cheap wireless shop which was tingling with music. A worn wooden stairway led to 'Art Advertising' on the first floor. The second floor was occupied by two families of Jews in the tailoring trade, and the sound of their heavy presses came between her and the mingled cacophony of the wireless establishment. Her rent was a pound a week, and since she had tastefully furnished her little flat and installed a bath it must have seemed to most people cheap at the price. She had her own telephone, electricity, electric fires and stove. The apartment was clean.

At the same time she could barely afford it. Her father, who had lived forty years in the Camden Road, was moving into half a house in one of the nondescript crescents of Camden Town, and he warmly advised her to come and live with him and her sister Emily, who would joint housekeep for them both.

Dr. Smith did not consider himself a poor man. When, just after the war, he sold his practice in the Prince of Wales Road, he had mustered sufficient capital to produce six hundred a year. He invested in sound

industrial securities, but as a result of the slump his income had diminished to a little over five hundred. Still, the cost of living decreased, and he could have managed to live comfortably on that, had it not been for the ever-increasing taxes. Suddenly he realised that if he did not move speedily into a cheaper house he was in danger of becoming bankrupt. Either that or he must sacrifice his ramshackle old car, which provided one of the few abiding pleasures which he and Emily possessed.

The market value of this car was now not more than ten pounds, and yet despite the steeply increasing tax on petrol the old man must pay twelve pounds a year for its licence. The car, which had only a market value of ten pounds, had a capital value to the government of two hundred and fifty pounds, and besides that earned revenue rapidly in petrol tax every time it was taken out.

In the removal, however, the car saved money. Emily and Clara drove it back and forth all the morning and afternoon, laden with whatever could be put on it. Only the heavy furniture was left for the van next day. Some of that went to the new home and the rest went to the auction rooms. Clara Lehman spent the day in the old house, sorting out from the drawers and the cupboards what might be worth keeping out of the accumulation of forty years. Many boxes were soon filled with medical books, old fire-irons wrapped in dusty pre-war newspapers, old chintz covers, sheets long since set aside to be torn up for dusters, but forgotten;

bonnets, baby clothes, toys. These were to be disposed of in the Caledonian Market, and the man who was to have them for his stall lent a willing hand at all sorts of jobs, such as removing washstands from the bedrooms to the car outside.

The family lunched at the Brecknock. Clara, nursing her original copybook in which she had first made pot-hooks and learned to write, the crimson shoes in which she had first danced, and a faded photo of her mother in wedding dress, was in a weak mood, near crying. Emily, plump and good-natured, alone seemed to bear up well under the strain of moving. Dr. Smith's rugged countenance was grimy and his spectacles were grimy too. The world on which he looked out must have seemed grimy also.

He attacked his steak and beer ravenously, for work had awakened an appetite. He did not eat with a doctor's caution, but swallowed large pieces of meat smothered with mustard and gulped down his beer. It was manifest that he was in a nervous state, for he never said a word in answer to Emily's query as to whether the piano could be got in at the door or whether it would not have been wiser to sell the *Encyclopædia Britannica* as so much had happened since 1900. He turned to Clara instead.

'So you're fully resolved not to come in with us?' said he moodily.

'I'd like to, father, but I can't. It's a bad address.'

'No worse than the one you have. In my young days

no respectable woman could be found living in Dial Street.'

'It hasn't changed, but a dancer can live there. But, papa, I ask you, Camden Town!'

'You were born there, my child.'

'Nobody knows. They think I was born in Vienna. I'm not going to be thought home-grown. I have just had an offer that would never have been made to me had it been thought that I was English. I haven't had time to tell you of that. I'm entering partnership with a celebrated dancer. His real name is Goodge. Isn't that prosaic? Goodge Street! But professionally he is Jacques. He is buying the Havana Four, guitarists, and the Savannah Six, nigger saxophonists, and combining to make them the hottest jazz combination in town. It will be Jacques' Band from the Jockey Club in Havana. And it is to be my orchestra, just for me to dance to, and Jacques and I are to do stylish new tangos and apache dances.'

Dr. Smith growled.

'As long as you get money out of it, my girl, I've nothing to say. Once, as you know, I regretted your decision to go out into the world and earn your living. There seemed to be enough for all of us. Your mother and I quarrelled over it. But I admit she was right. Today I feel as if we were being removed to the infirmary. I've not had a square deal. I worked my share, God knows, before Unemployment Insurance put doctors in the way of earning more and working less. Had I known we were to be taxed in the way we are

today I would have made a safer calculation as to the amount I needed to safeguard my old age and my family. But there you are. No one takes us into account.'

'I shouldn't worry about it, father,' said Emily. 'In the new house we'll begin to save. The other wasn't really practical.'

'I'd like to be with you, you know,' said Clara. 'But I've been thinking over Mr. Goodge's proposition and I feel I ought to accept it. As a preliminary I shall be billed to dance with him at La France next week, and what an ad. for me at any price. So that's how it stands. Don't you think I'm wise?'

'Well, anyhow, the honourable name of Smith will not be blazoned on Shaftesbury Avenue,' said the doctor, smiling ironically.

'I've also met a gentleman who says he can get me lots of free seats for the theatre.'

'You always have to pay more for what you get free,' said Dr. Smith. He refused to see the bright side.

'You might send along some for us,' said Emily. 'I haven't seen a good show for an age. Not since father met one of his old patients in the gallery queue.'

'Is this someone new?' asked the doctor. 'Who is he?'

'Quite new. He's my latest acquisition. The driest old stick you ever saw, but I rather like him. He is taking me to *The Romantic Widow* tonight.'

'Oh, do get us seats for that,' cried Emily. 'I'm dying to see it.'

‘I’ll do my best. Would you like to see me at La France?’

‘We must get on with this moving job,’ said the doctor testily, but he was a little mollified by the prospect of receiving theatre seats. Secretly he admired Clara, and thought of her as his ‘brilliant daughter.’ She had those qualities which had originally attracted him to her mother. Emily was commonplace, industrious and matter-of-fact like himself, but Clara was wilful, ambitious, making the best of her good looks, intent on shining, ready to take risks, even to play with fire if it gave her a place in the light. He had heard of her gentlemen friends, but he knew little of her intimate life and did not pry. He hoped that ultimately she would make a decent marriage with a man who could support her in style, but he was aware that the generation to which she belonged lived in a way that was beyond his comprehension.

Chapter Five

‘THE ADVANTAGE of free seats at the theatre is that you not only avoid paying for the seats but also the Entertainment Tax on them.’ In delivering this opinion Mr. Pillguard stretched his legs at ease in a comfortable box and looked down on the people in the stalls with a sense of superiority.

‘But that makes you a sympathiser with tax dodgers,’ said Miss Lehman with soft surprise.

‘No, because I am opposed on principle to the Entertainment Tax. It is really a tax on culture.’

‘But the Government need the money.’

‘It can raise it in income tax. I am in favour of commuting the whole amount of our indirect taxation for a lump sum in income tax. That would be simpler and fairer.’

‘Do you like my dress?’ asked Clara, anxious to change the subject.

‘Yes, but to my professional eye it represents too much tax. You are robed in taxes, Miss Lehman.’

The conversation was all about taxes, and even when the lights went down and *The Romantic Widow* held the scene Clara felt that her partner was mentally assessing all and sundry.

'What do you consider your job in life?' asked Pillguard in the first entr'acte. 'Dancing?'

'No, not dancing,' said Clara defiantly. 'My job in life is being a woman, just that and nothing more, just as I consider your job in life should be being a man.'

'A very offensive line of talk,' mused the inspector. 'Women have a curious way of being personal.'

'I see two of my senior wranglers in the front row of the stalls,' said he. 'Look, the bald man on the extreme right, that's Dr. Venables. And a little farther on towards the middle, the pale man reading his programme, that's Mr. Midget, of Midget and Alton, the accountants. They are real men for you, both pay on the nail. Hardly have the demand notes been posted than their cheques come in.'

'My father used to pay up gladly, too, but then he had heaps of money.'

The inspector was at once interested. He quickly forgot about the play in finding out where the father was living, what was his profession, how he had fallen on hard times, whether he did not pick up a stray fee now and then though without a practice. Clara's account of her father was satisfactory, and Mr. Pillguard sighed relief.

'He may be in difficulties, but he's a man to be proud of,' said he with conviction. 'He does not reside in my district, but I'd be happy to meet him. Perhaps I might be able to help him. Is his life insured?'

But again *The Romantic Widow* intervened. In the second act she married a matter-of-fact man from

Puddletown. He had become romantic, but once married she had become matter-of-fact, no longer Cleopatra, but sheer Battersea. The success of the play depended on the humorous treatment of the situations. In the third act the couple were divorced and the wife became romantic again and was courting another matter-of-fact man while the ex-husband gladly turned the pages while a dreamy virgin sang sentimental songs. Clara enjoyed the show and Mr. Pillguard was pleased. He did not think much of the play, but he felt responsible for it's being good.

His plan now was to take Miss Lehman home in a taxi and then to walk over to his own flat and go to bed. But as Clara was going down the theatre stairs she turned to him and smiled sweetly.

'Let's go to Allegretti's,' said she, as if inviting him.

Allegretti's after the theatre might prove a trifle expensive, but for a moment the inexperienced Mr. Pillguard thought he might be going as her guest. He had taken her to the theatre; now she was taking him to a restaurant. She would pay the bill. It was only in the taxi that he grasped that he would have to pay, but it was too late to draw back. Fortunately Allegretti's was in his district. He had not been there before, but Allegretti had been up to see him, and perhaps he would remember his face. There was a curious feature in Allegretti's accounts, a return of a debt of two thousand pounds to a brother in Alexandria.

Mr. Allegretti was more than pleased to see Mr. Pillguard in his establishment, and was so lavish in his

attentions that Clara was impressed in spite of herself. She saw her escort in a new light. He was really much more important than she had imagined. Mr. Pillguard was also pleased and flattered, and thought a little better of Mr. Giuseppe Allegetti.

Clara was hungry, for Mr. Pillguard had not invited her to dinner before the theatre, and she had had little time to prepare anything for herself after she had got back from Camden Town. She looked gratefully at the inspector as an excellent chicken supper with a bottle of Capri was set before them, but for the first time she realised that her brown eyes were not entirely irresistible. Her man was in a good humour, but there was a reserve about him that she had not been able to penetrate. In a way she was at peace. She had enjoyed the theatre, she had an impressive partner, she was eating a good supper. But she felt she had not made contact. Mr. Pillguard had grown on her a little, but she had not grown on him. He must like her or he would not be taking her out. But she had not managed to take him out of himself. Both at Celestine's and here at the restaurant, he was an official. His mind was still in the office he had left behind at five o'clock. But if Clara was uneasy she liked it.

No compliments, no advances, no sentiment. . . . Mr. Pillguard seemed as matter-of-fact as the man in the play, but not absurd, you could not laugh at him.

'What are you thinking of?' asked the inspector suddenly.

'Nothing. I was thinking we have spent the evening

together but you remain rather distant and aloof, as if you had satisfied your curiosity about me. Perhaps this will be our last meeting.'

'Why should you think that?'

'There are lots of men who take up a girl for two nights and pay her much attention and then drop her for ever without any particular reason.'

'Fearing to get entangled?'

'Yes, I suppose. Married men are very much that way.'

'But then I am not married.'

'No? I was not quite sure, but I thought you weren't.'

'I suppose you haven't got a husband lurking somewhere?'

'Then I should have to be assessed on his form?'

Mr. Pillguard smiled.

'Now you are talking taxes,' said he.

'I am entering into partnership with a man,' said Clara.

'What do you mean?' asked Pillguard sharply. 'Not going to live with one, I hope.'

'No, I'm not that sort.'

Mr. Pillguard did not show that he was in any way relieved. 'Do you mean that if a man asked you to live with him and you liked him you would refuse?'

'Certainly, what do you take me for?'

'Well, that settles that.'

'Settles what, Mr. Pillguard? Were you thinking of asking me?'

The inspector's black moustache nervously swallowed his lower lip. Clara could see that he was taken aback, and that she ought not to have asked the question. He did not reply, but instead felt in his pocket for a cigar. To his annoyance he discovered that he had forgotten to bring any. But Mr. Allegretti, who had been watching him, understood immediately and hurried forward with a box of the best Havanas.

'I could not afford these,' said Mr. Pillguard morosely.

'Take one please,' said Mr. Allegretti, in a high-pitched Italian treble. 'I wish you to try. You are my guest.'

'That's exceedingly good of you. I will.'

'My engagement with Celestine's ends this week,' said Clara, when he had got his cigar alight. 'I begin next week with Jacques at La France. You remember the man I danced the tango with at Celestine's?'

'You are going into partnership with him? You mean you have accepted him as a dancing partner for one engagement?'

'Not only that. He is buying a band and has asked me to come in with him.'

Mr. Pillguard stroked his smooth chin as if feeling for a hair. His brow was wrinkled and he looked very official, as if most certainly he was about to ask details of Jacques' income. But actually he was invoking his memory, which was indeed an official product.

'But his name is not Jacques,' said he. 'His name is

Goodge. He used to run the Piccadilly Salon, but closed down with a big deficit.'

'How do you know all that?' asked Clara with some surprise.

'Never mind! I make it my business to know. So you are entering partnership with him! Do you think it wise? I do think you might have asked my advice.'

'I might have,' said Clara. 'Would you have advised me?'

'Most decidedly.'

'But then you know next to nothing about the dancing business. You told me so yourself.'

'I sized him up directly I saw him.'

'How can you say that? I found him perfectly charming to deal with.'

'I say I got him taped,' said Mr. Pillguard angrily. 'What was his proposal? Tell me all the details. I want to know.'

'I don't think I ought to tell you more,' said Clara pettishly. 'If you think there was a dishonourable side to it you are mistaken. It will be a purely business relationship.'

'Well I hope so,' said the inspector with an air of finality, and the conversation languished. Miss Lehman said no more. She had finished her supper and now evidently thought of going home. The evening was not ending as well as she had hoped. Mr. Pillguard called for the bill.

The reckoning was brought to him by a waiter behind whom stood Mr. Allegetti bowing. It was much less

than Mr. Pillguard had expected, and he realised pleasantly that he had been charged an absolute minimum.

‘Everything all right?’ asked Mr. Allegretti.

‘Quite,’ replied Mr. Pillguard with conviction. ‘By the way, Mr. Allegretti, why don’t you ask your brother to go to the Consul in Alexandria and swear a simple statement that he put two thousand pounds into your business. I believe if you could do that, I could settle your case out of hand.’

‘I do my best,’ said the restaurateur, and gladly fondled Mr. Pillguard’s outstretched hand.

‘I believe he’s straight,’ said the inspector when he was seated with Clara in the taxi.

But Clara did not answer. She did not say a word until the cab entered Dial Street and then, as it came alongside the shuttered radio shop, she turned to Mr. Pillguard and looked at him searchingly.

‘Would you care to see my flat?’ she asked.

Mr. Pillguard threw the stump of his cigar out of the taxi window. He was thoroughly surprised. Judging from what he had seen on the stage and read in novels such an invitation could have but one meaning. He had summed Miss Lehman up as a perfectly moral young lady. What was he to think?

‘I couldn’t do that,’ he whispered.

Clara then laughed. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Don’t be afraid. It won’t compromise you. Nobody need know.’

Then she meant it. ‘No,’ said he. ‘I thought you said you were not that sort.’

Clara was anxious to have him come. Otherwise she felt she would be misunderstood and Mr. Pillguard might drop her. Perhaps it would not mean much to her to lose him, but she was unwilling to lose him on those terms. So she refused to take offence.

'You are out of date,' she said. 'My mother could not have asked a man up to her flat at midnight, but our generation is freer. We live more like men, especially when we happen to be earning our living as I am. Of course, if you'd rather not, I'll understand, but it's quite all right.'

The taxi was scoring points. Mr. Pillguard was not entirely reassured, but he was aware that he might be wrong. He knew he was pitifully inexperienced where women were concerned. 'If she tries anything on,' he reflected, 'I leave at once.' Then he was a little curious. He smiled and melted.

'If I come will you tell me all about your partnership?' he asked.

In a minute he had paid the taximan and was mounting the dark wooden stairs with Clara.

Clara turned on the electric light in her flat, threw off her coat, placed Pillguard on a sofa and then, curling her legs under her in an armchair, faced him and smiled. She was certainly fascinating in her home. Mr. Pillguard's eyes roved over the flat and took in every detail but came back to rest on her face. Her eyes were very bright, and her loose hair glittered. Her white shoulders, which had seemed like marble in the theatre and the restaurant, now seemed soft and intimate like one's own

hand. Mr. Pillguard seemed wooden and self-conscious, but he smoked one of her gold-tipped cigarettes to put himself more at ease. She leant over him to put a crimson cushion at his back, and he could have kissed her, but that was far from his thoughts.

‘You’ve got a cosy little nest up here,’ said he.

‘You like it?’

‘I think it’s perfectly delightful. Whose portrait is that?’

‘My mother’s. I only brought it here from home today.’

‘You are like her.’ Mr. Pillguard got up and stared at the photograph. ‘Very like,’ he added. ‘A beautiful woman in her time, I should say.’ He returned to his seat in the sofa and made himself much more comfortable.

‘Now,’ said he. ‘Your promise. Tell me all about this partnership. What are you going to get out of it? Have you signed anything?’

Clara told the story of her interview with Stanley Goodge, placing everything in the best possible light. She was anxious that Mr. Pillguard should not think she had done anything foolish, but at the same time she had become infected with a slight doubt as to her new partner’s probity. She disliked the aggressive cross-questioning of the inspector, but it gave her a peaceful feeling, as if she were confessing something to a responsible and intelligent father, though in truth she could never have taken dear old Dr. Smith so greatly into her confidence.

'I think he is a bad hat,' said Mr. Pillguard at length. 'But I will be at pains to find out.'

'I don't suppose he's paid his income tax for years,' said Clara. 'But please don't sue him. You know, if you damage him you damage my prospects also.'

'What makes you think he has not paid his taxes?'

'Nothing in particular. He's that sort.'

'Didn't I say so? But you can set your mind at rest. As a public servant I must see that he pays his taxes. But as a man . . .' Mr. Pillguard smiled in quite a winning way, '. . . I'm reminded of what you said in the theatre; as a man, I shall take care that you do not suffer.'

'You have been very kind,' said Clara as he got up to go. And she placed a hand on his shoulder, but he did not reciprocate the advance. 'I have enjoyed every moment,' said he. 'If you consent we will repeat the experiment some evening soon.'

'Experiment?' exclaimed Clara, laughing. 'What a funny expression!'

But Mr. Pillguard did not offer an alternative word. Greatly preoccupied he allowed himself to be led downstairs, and after a quite cold and formal handshake hurried home to his bachelor apartment.

Next day he took time off from the office and made a trip to Special Commissioners to look up the assessments upon Mr. Stanley Goodge.

Chapter Six

MR. PILLGUARD accompanied Clara to Celestine's on Tuesday and Wednesday, but successfully resisted the inclination to do the same on Thursday. Instead he visited his chess club, where he had a tournament game to play with his revenue colleague Starman. High over St. Giles' Circus there is a room with twenty-four tables, and on every table there are two clocks and a chessboard and a writing-pad. Here chess is taken as seriously as it deserves. There is enough tobacco smoke and silence to have pleased Carlyle. Mr. Pillguard found Mr. Starman waiting for him.

Mr. Pillguard lost his game and then played another, a 'friendly' which he won. Then they went to the Corner House over the way for a mixed grill and a cup of coffee, and talked of taxes and the Empire and the point of view of Somerset House, for Starman was a Somerset House young man grown middle-aged, had been an examiner of claims for return of income tax, but was now higher in the counsels of the Board. We cannot reproduce the whole of that conversation here, as it was too technical, but we will eavesdrop it half-way through.

'You can't run a big concern like the Empire without a lot of red tape,' said Pillguard.

'Oh, go on! We have got rid of South Africa, Ireland, we are getting rid of India, the Colonies have become self-governing nations, but where has there been a diminution in red tape? No, my boy, the red tape industry is the one business that is doing well and not passing its dividends. We can thank God we're in it, but it's a melancholy thought that we're living on the nation and it can't shake us off its back.'

Pillguard grimaced. 'Permit me my cigar,' said he. 'Will you have one?'

'That's the way you cut down your smokes,' said Starman, accepting one of Iredale's coronas. 'How are you making out on your economies? I find tobacco hard to reduce.'

'They're a gift,' said Pillguard gloomily. 'But living is costing me a bit more than I expected. I remember your saying once after a game of chess, life is a gamble, and I'm beginning to think you are right. One constructs an ironclad plan for one's life and then it gets torpedoed by some force outside one's calculations.'

Starman looked at him waggishly.

'Obscure,' said he. 'Not like you. What does all that mean?'

'A slight change has invaded my bachelor existence,' said Pillguard sadly.

'A lady?' asked Starman with instant comprehension.

'I say, you are quick,' exclaimed Pillguard in surprise.

'But you are right, and really I intended to tell you in any case. You are a married man, you have had a lot of experience, and perhaps you can give me some advice.'

Mr. Starman had the wisdom not to show that he was amused. But he would have regarded Pillguard as the last man in the world to fall for the sex, a confirmed bachelor if ever there was one. It flashed through his mind that if he did fall he was the sort to fall very heavily.

'Who is she?' he asked. 'If you are thinking of getting married you do not need me to tell you that under the new rate a bachelor's allowance is much more generous than that for a married man.'

Starman whistled softly when he heard she was a dancer. 'I should seriously consider the advantages of living in sin,' said he with a smile.

'Don't misunderstand me, Starman, it hasn't come to that,' said Pillguard angrily. 'I did not even say I was thinking of getting married. It is simply a matter of companionship. For some unearthly reason I begin to find it pleasant to go out with this lady nearly every night. It comes a bit expensive, and I can't afford it as things are. The question on which I wanted to ask your advice is wouldn't it be better to cut the connection now while I have the power than to drift on into a more difficult position?'

'Many people get married just to save the expense.'

'What expense?'

'The expense of going out every night. But if you

seriously want my advice, which I doubt, I should say it was just the thing for a virgin man of forty-five.'

'Who told you that?' asked Pillguard self-consciously.

'Well, aren't you?'

'I shouldn't bet on that if I were you.' Pillguard appeared to cogitate. Starman knew him well, but he might have had an affair in his youth without this examiner of claims knowing anything about it. Pillguard felt that he ought to have had an affair, but he did not quite know why. The whole Roman clergy managed to get on without women, and there was nothing discreditable in the fact. He had often felt there was something monastic about his job. He was wedded to the Inland Revenue; it was his all in all. He had lived for it, in the office and out of it. He could not divide his interest without a great struggle.

'If she's a dancer the connection could only end in one way,' said Starman glibly. 'Where's she from, the Gaiety chorus?'

'Oh no, don't misunderstand, not a ballet girl; she's quite superior.'

'I'd like to meet her.'

'Good man!' exclaimed Pillguard exuberantly. 'You shall. Would you like to meet her tonight?'

'It's a bit late,' said Starman, looking at his watch. 'But where?'

'At Celestine's. It's not late. Things are only just beginning to liven up there. What do you say? Let's take a taxi and go along now.'

‘But she does not expect you. Is it wise, do you think?’

‘Why not?’

Starman shrugged his shoulders.

‘Let’s go,’ said he. ‘That’s also a bit new. Since when have you been a frequenter of night-clubs?’

‘That’s one up on you, eh, old boy?’ exclaimed Pillguard jovially. He was in high spirits, and even his forbidding black moustache failed to disguise the merry expression of his face. On the way to Celestine’s he exhibited a boyishness which surprised Mr. Starman.

In the anteroom of the club he made Starman lose five shillings in the gambling machines while he himself won fifteen. It was purely a matter of chance, but he behaved as if he had some special skill or knew the trick. But his enthusiasm was damped when he was informed that Miss Lehman was the guest of a member that night and he could not have the place that had been reserved for him on previous occasions. Seeing they were not in evening dress the manager led them to an obscure table from which the stage was partly hidden by a potted palm. Mr. Pillguard kept turning his head, but could not discover Miss Lehman among the company. At his accustomed table there was a party which he did not recognise. Masha was singing, but the guests were getting tired of her, and there was a loud buzz of conversation.

Nevertheless he kept up the pose of night-club hero to Mr. Starman, who was excited by the novelty of the scene and was content to be told who the performers

were and who were the various guests. Pillguard was full of information as to everyone's income, and gladly gave details. But he could not point out Clara because she was in the dressing-room. The waiter told him that and he was relieved. He ordered a couple of brandies and relaxed.

Masha departed, and the orchestra struck up a lively jazz and various couples took the floor.

'In a strange sort of way, although I do not dance, I begin to feel at home here,' said he.

'You ought to learn to dance,' said Starman.

'Do you dance? Where do you dance?' asked Pillguard incredulously.

'I dance with my wife or my daughter every night to the radio,' said Starman. 'It keeps me fit.'

'I should never have thought it,' said Pillguard, 'at your age.'

'Dancing is just right for middle-aged and elderly men,' said Starman. 'I admit that does not hold good for elderly women, and I would much rather dance with my daughter than with Mrs. Starman. It's our bridge with youth. A man of forty gets on finely with a girl of eighteen if he dances well.'

When the fox-trot was over and had been clapped by the dancers Clara came out to do her Spanish number. This she had modified considerably under the guidance of Mr. Goodge, and it had become more risky and suggestive. The guests now gave her more of their attention than they had bestowed on Masha and Chenokidze, especially the men, who stared at her legs

as if anxious to miss nothing. This dance had developed under the eyes of Mr. Pillguard, who until this evening had not noticed the change. He had pointed her out to Starman directly she appeared, but, like the rest of the men, his gaze became riveted on her body as she danced.

‘A shade on the naughty side, but I congratulate you. She’s fine,’ said Starman enthusiastically.

‘You like her?’ asked Pillguard.

‘I do indeed. But how did she come to pick on a man like you?’

‘What’s the matter with me?’

‘Nothing. Only you’re not her sort. She’s expensive. She can get whatever she wants from men and if I’m any judge she’ll jolly well get it.’

When her number was concluded Pillguard stood up to applaud her so that she should be sure to see him. And she caught his eye for a moment and frowned slightly as if not too pleased to see him. Pillguard fully expected that when she put on her wrap she would come to him and he was more than chagrined when he saw her deliberately turn her head away and go to a table which was just outside his line of vision. He craned his neck and saw Mr. Stanley Goodge, otherwise Jacques, sitting there.

It was with difficulty that he hid his disgust from his friend. ‘Unfortunately she did not expect us, and is someone else’s guest for the evening,’ said he. A waltz followed, and Pillguard was able to point out Clara’s partner.

‘Yes,’ said Pillguard. ‘He’s a professional dancer also. He has had a varied career, arrived in London from South Africa in 1918, dodged military service, ran a back-stage café which failed, trained and ran the Quiller girls, who made the rounds of the music-halls twice and then accepted an engagement in Buenos Aires and disappeared. In 1924 he started the Ritzy School of Dancing, which also failed. His real name appears to be Grafton. For a few years he ran a matrimonial bureau, which was closed by the police, and then took the name of Goodge. He seems always to have been able to mobilise capital to start something fresh, and we soon find him running the Piccadilly Salon, which you’ve probably heard of. It was quite a success. Why it failed I haven’t been able to fathom.’

‘You seem to have taken a good deal of trouble to find out all about him,’ said Starman.

‘Oh,’ said Pillguard nonchalantly. ‘I took the trouble to look him up. He is one of the many thousands of obvious tax dodgers whom the department does not take the trouble to tackle. Why, I don’t know. Not in my district. Since the war he has paid about two hundred pounds in tax, and I suppose they think that is enough to expect from a doubtful character. His return is made out by one of those Income Tax Repayment Agencies who take a commission on the amount they save the taxpayer. I am sorry Miss Lehman has got mixed up with him. Yes, she has gone into some sort of business partnership with him.’

'You ought to get her out of that.'

The waltz being over Clara did not return to her table. Mr. Goodge went over to chat to an acquaintance and she took the opportunity of coming to Mr. Pillguard. The inspector smiled quizzically.

'Now I know who you are with when you are not with me,' said he.

'Jacques,' she murmured, glancing at Starman. 'Doesn't he dance divinely?'

'No better than you do,' said Mr. Starman.

'This is Mr. Starman, an old friend of mine.'

Mr. Starman put forth a hand.

'I've been telling him he ought to learn to dance,' said Starman.

'Yes, I wish he would. Do you dance?'

Starman feigned modesty, but he had soon captured Clara Lehman for the fox-trot which ensued, and Pillguard was left alone and baffled. He thought it great cheek on Starman's part, but he was curious to see how he danced. He felt sure Starman would make a fool of himself. But no, he was a very competent dancer, and the only flaw in his appearance was his shabby office attire, which seemed to accentuate the fact that he did not in any way belong to the place. He caught a humorous twinkle in Mr. Goodge's eye, and to his astonishment that gentleman came over towards him and shook hands with easy familiarity as if he had known him for years.

Mr. Pillguard, nonplussed, found himself smiling weakly and affably, promising to take lessons in dancing

from Jacques, and agreeing in compliments to Clara when he really would have liked to take the man by the collar and kick him on the floor. But there was no mistaking the evidence that Stanley Goodge, *alias* Grafton, *alias* Jacques, intended to be on friendly terms. Was this Clara's idea, or was it Goodge's? Clara joined them, gushing with expressions of pleasure and complimenting Mr. Pillguard on the way his friend danced. After some idle chatter Goodge took her away to dance a tango, and that was the most he saw of her for the rest of the night. For Mr. Starman must catch his last bus to Stoke Newington, and Pillguard was not such a fool as to think of staying on at the club by himself.

Starman was loud in praises of the lady, but Pillguard felt that the evening had not turned out satisfactorily. The thought that Stanley Goodge would see Clara home and perhaps be invited up to her flat as he had been gnawed at his mind. The naughtiness in her Spanish dance recurred to his memory. The affability of Mr. Goodge and more than that his own affability towards Mr. Goodge annoyed him. How was it possible that he should be on friendly terms with a bounder like that, a man who had actually conducted a matrimonial agency? He let his friend run on in praises of Miss Lehman, but he did not back him up.

'Well, what do you advise?' asked he abruptly and angrily as they came to the bus-stop. 'Shall I go on with it or shall I cut it out now?'

'My dear chap,' said Starman. 'I haven't the shadow

of doubt. If she's in any way fond of you, go on with it by all means.'

Pillguard felt secretly pleased because it was the advice he wanted. But he did not show it. On the contrary he seemed angry with Starman.

'Don't you think it's a bit of a gamble?'

'Ah, you always play for safety,' said Starman, laughing, as he got into his bus.

Chapter Seven

CLARA LEHMAN agreed to make Stanley Goodge her agent and did not think it unfair that for their engagement at La France he should have half the fee plus fifteen per cent of her half. He was older and more experienced and in her judgment was entitled to something extra.

Clara soon discovered that her partner had a fondness for deals of one kind or another. He said he was greatly in need of a car. Clara offered to borrow her father's car occasionally, and he seemed pleased. He went to see her father and made a deal. Clara was to pay half the cost of licence and would be entitled to the use of the car for half the time. That was a matter of six pounds, and he agreed to allow Clara three pounds in making up their mutual accounts. Dr. Smith did not see much more of his car for some time. In effect Mr. Stanley Goodge got his car for nothing, and only paid one quarter of the cost of the licence. Each night after their show at the Trocadero Clara took him home in it and then drove it to the little ramshackle garage at the corner of Dial Street.

Goodge had found two Irish children who were like enough to pass for twins, and was teaching them to

dance for the music-halls. He had for the purpose of training the use of a dance floor in Ham Yard. It was the floor of a club that had been suspended, and it was hired by a number of people in the entertainment business who came to rehearse their acts at stipulated hours. It was there that Clara and Stanley Goodge practised their new steps. There she met Pat and Maureen, who practised making love in dance movements like marionettes on a string, the string held and manipulated by Jacques. There also came the Havana Four and the Savannah Six to practise the synthetic jazz of Jacques' Band.

Pillguard, after the slight disenchantment of finding Clara with Goodge on that night when he brought Mr. Starman, seemed to turn cool towards Clara. At least he took no notice of the card invitation which he received for the opening night at La France. Nor did he put in an appearance during the whole of the week. Clara was left in the company of Goodge, whose behaviour nevertheless was conventional and impersonal. He was polite enough, even gallant in the presence of strangers, but the relationship did not amount to friendliness. He treated her on an equal footing much as if she were a man. This flattered her self-esteem, but she asked more from any man in whose company she was so much.

She soon discovered that Goodge was a man of mystery. He did not talk of his past, did not seem to have a family. He lived in a room in Lancaster Gate Terrace, but he had another room, or was it an office,

in a street near King's Cross. He had rich acquaintances in business, but they did not seem to treat him with esteem. There was Sawyer, whose name appeared on so many houses that were to let: 'Apply J. Sawyer.' Sawyer was the landlord at Ham Yard and not infrequently came in to watch the rehearsals.

'Be nice to him! He represents the greatest mass of mortgages in the West End of London,' said Goodge. 'Ten years ago he came to London from the provinces. He hadn't a bean. He got a loan somewhere and bought some property. He then mortgaged the property and bought some more. He mortgaged that and bought more still. He took out second mortgages. His interest in a lot of big buildings where you see his name does not amount to more than a tenth of one per cent. He lived on the margin between his mortgage interests and his rents, and when I first met him he was suffering from the slump in house property, and was nearer Carey Street than I was. Then he had a stroke of luck. Three of his houses were bought at a high figure to make a clearance for a modern cinema. Since then he has done damn' well. He has so many stakes that some of them are always turning out to be winners. And when the pound fell all his titles in real estate increased in value.'

This was beyond the comprehension of Clara, who only understood that Sawyer had money and Mr. Goodge wanted him to take a share in financing Jacques' Band. Therefore she must be nice to him.

He sat on a wooden chair holding his silk hat on his

knees. He was always in morning dress with striped trousers, sallow, lanky, with an expressionless face as if cut out of sandstone. He did not applaud, but seemed waiting for the close of the performance to seize the premises. But that was not his intention. He had nothing to say, but he invited Miss Lehman to have lunch with him at the Savoy. He did not invite Goodge, who did not, however, seem affected by the obvious slight. Mr. Sawyer looked at his gold watch. They went away together in his Rolls-Royce.

Being nice to Mr. Sawyer was not easy, because he was entirely uncommunicative, and sat stiffly in the car with his silk hat perched jauntily on the side of his head. At last he remarked that the weather was fine for the time of year. Clara agreed to that, and smiled sweetly as if he had paid her a compliment.

Mr. Sawyer lunched every day at the Savoy and had his table, which was reserved for him. Two other guests were already seated when Mr. Sawyer and Miss Lehman arrived. They were two business men connected with the stage. Clara soon learned that the younger and more pleasant was Mr. Duggan, the producer of *The Romantic Widow*, and the other, who was more aloof and looked as if he owned a half-share in the Savoy and yet feared having his pockets picked, was Hardinge, the lessee of the Arena Theatre, looking for a theatrical manager who would stage something there. The Arena had been closed for months, and Hardinge had just taken a lease at the nominal rent of three hundred pounds a year. Or failing that he might persuade Mr.

Sawyer to relieve him of his responsibility by taking the lease off him. He, like Mr. Goodge, was after Mr. Sawyer's money, but so also in another way was Mr. Duggan, who wished to beguile him into putting up part of the money necessary for launching a show which he had a mind to produce.

Mr. Sawyer treated Clara with much respect, deferring to her the ordering of the luncheon and the choice of the wine. Clara made no decisions, and yet Sawyer contrived to make it appear that her taste governed his. Mr. Duggan concluded that Clara Lehman was decidedly a lady to cultivate. And this was easier because she had been to see *The Romantic Widow*, and spoke rapturously of it.

Mr. Sawyer, like a man of business with no memory, put a scribbling-pad down beside his array of silver-plated forks, and having fastened his table napkin to the third button of his vest, jotted down the words *Romantic Widow*.

'I'd like to get that when it finishes its run at the Irving,' said Hardinge, as if to himself. Sawyer made no comment.

Duggan was even more pleased when he discovered that of the various successes in town Clara had only seen his production.

'You haven't seen *The Unskilful Lover*? Oh, you really must see *The Unskilful Lover*, don't you think so, Sawyer? Billy Custard fumbling with an American blonde. That's going to hit the town.'

Mr. Sawyer having carefully removed the edible part

of a sole from its recumbent skeleton, was writing the words *Unskilful Lover* on his pad and looked up through his eyebrows.

‘I haven’t seen it. What’s it about?’ he asked.

‘The whole idea is that the sophisticated young woman of today has got tired of the sophisticated young man, and prefers a man who is old-fashioned, a man she can teach to be just a little bit naughty, not too much, you know.’ Mr. Duggan smiled artfully. ‘What do you think, Miss Lehman?’ he asked.

‘We might work together to get that transferred to the Arena,’ said Mr. Hardinge.

Clara thought the question audacious, and cast a glance in Sawyer’s direction. His face was entirely non-committal.

‘If the awkward man has a little money,’ she said.

‘You think then she might take a lot of trouble with him?’

‘Personally I like shy men,’ said Clara. She laughed. ‘But I haven’t had much experience,’ she added.

Mr. Sawyer was busily scribbling on his pad, and Clara glanced at him self-consciously.

‘You ought to have been cautioned,’ said Hardinge sardonically. ‘Everything you say may be used against you.’ Mr. Sawyer flushed slightly, picked up his writing-pad and put it in his inside pocket.

‘Notes for my day-book,’ said he aside to Clara. ‘I keep a record of conversations at lunch, just for my own personal interest, not for publication of course.’

This was the longest speech Mr. Sawyer had made, and his guests listened to him with gratification and attention. Was it the effect of the wine and a good luncheon? From that point onward he brightened considerably. Mr. Duggan nodded to someone in the restaurant. It was Iredale, who had finished lunch and was about to depart. Mr. Sawyer turned about in his seat and smiled. Iredale took it as an invitation, and came over and sat down to finish his cigar in their company. Mr. Sawyer introduced Clara with such an air of possession that she felt annoyed. Mr. Iredale was discreetly silent as to his having heard of Clara from Pillguard.

‘Ah,’ he said warmly, ‘the celebrated dancer. I’ve wanted to meet you for some time.’

Hardinge and Duggan took in the information that she was a dancer and looked at her afresh; Duggan positively stared as if trying to remember her face. He certainly did not remember her name. But then he had little to do with dancers in his job. If Iredale said she was a famous dancer she probably was. Clara’s annoyance with Sawyer passed. ‘You’ve seen me at La France?’ she hazarded.

‘Unfortunately not,’ said Iredale, enjoying the opportunity of flattery. ‘I’ve been intending to go, but I’m the slave of my theatres and my various companies on tour. I seldom get a night off to please myself.’

‘Have you found a home for the *Widow* after

Christmas? Why not take the Arena?' asked Hardinge.

'The Arena,' exclaimed Iredale, chuckling. 'I never thought of that. But the place is a barn.'

'But the Arena has had some great successes in its time, and the rent is dirt cheap. That's a consideration.'

'It needs re-equipment. That's a speculation for you, Sawyer. Why don't you put in a revolving stage and run a pantomime there? Ideal for a pantomime. Pantomimes are much better in old-fashioned theatres.'

'Sawyer is cautious,' said Duggan. 'He is waiting to back a certainty, and I don't blame him.'

'No,' said Sawyer. 'I'd be a fool if I didn't consider a tip from a successful man like Iredale. I appreciate what he says, and I'll think it over. Revolving stage, pantomime. . . .' He nervously pulled out his pad and wrote in it again. 'Do you happen to know if one could pick up a second-hand revolving stage cheap anywhere?'

Hardinge bit his lower lip to hide a self-satisfied smile. The question might be absurd, but the man with the money was nibbling. Still he might land him.

The eagle eyes of Iredale were hooded. The old man's face had lost something of its urbanity. He seemed to have completely forgotten Clara, who fidgeted with her bag and felt she had no part or interest in the conversation. One big business man had met another and she was as nothing.

‘I’ll write you about that if you like,’ said Iredale shortly.

And soon the luncheon-party broke up. The guests severally departed. Mr. Sawyer, left alone with Clara, wished to drive her somewhere, home or to her club or shopping, whatever she wished. The car was at her disposal. It seemed a little premature to let him take her shopping, whatever his interest in her might be. Clara decided that she ought really to go home if it would not put him out of his way to drop her in Dial Street.

At the hotel florists he bought her a large bouquet. ‘I am most grateful for your company,’ said he. ‘I hope it will not be the last time.’

Clara accepted the flowers appreciatively, and pictured at once how they would be distributed in her rooms.

They drove silently to Dial Street. Once more Mr. Sawyer’s face was like a lump of sandstone. He held his gloves in his hands on his knees. His silk hat was perched jauntily on his head. Perhaps he had never heard of Dial Street before, or it escaped his memory. He started and looked out of the car window when Clara announced that they had arrived. Evidently he was surprised, and did not like the look of the street, for he at once remarked that she ought to move. He did not allow her to get out at once.

‘What rent do you pay?’ he asked. Clara told him. He cogitated a moment, and then remarked: ‘I have several flats at my disposal. I could find you something

much better at the price . . . if you were willing.' The last words he pronounced very softly. He handed Clara out of the car. She looked at him very attentively as if to judge his meaning. She remembered what Goodge had said: be nice to him, and forbore to give him an emphatic no.

Chapter Eight

PILLGUARD at the great national election had intended to vote Socialist, but was caught by the fast-flowing tide. Against his will and judgment he voted top-hat. But afterwards he was disillusioned. Iredale and Pillguard met again to play chess, but not without a breeze over the subject of taxes.

‘It’s all very well for you to laugh, Pillguard,’ said Iredale. ‘You eat, drink, breathe taxes. But for taxes you might be selling matches on the Embankment. If we, the taxpayers, decided *en masse* to pay no more than a fair tax as assessed by a committee of responsible citizens, you bureaucrats would be in a nice mess. You could not put the whole British nation in gaol.’

‘Steady on, Iredale! You know I am utterly opposed to the Entertainment Tax. I’d have the amount commuted to the income tax tomorrow if I had my way. The British Empire is a sort of club. There ought to be a fixed subscription, the income tax. Members ought to know exactly what they are paying for the privileges. Then there would be a more intelligent criticism of the privileges.’

Iredale, as if a little ashamed of his outburst, had turned to the chessmen on his table and was arranging

them for a game. 'I put it the other way round,' said he quietly. 'There would be a more intelligent criticism of the amount of the dues. Will you play white?'

'In this game the Opposition always has an equal number of pieces with the Government,' said Pillguard mirthfully. He was in a very good humour, as if in conversation he had already checkmated Iredale. He moved his queen's pawn with thumb and first finger with an air of indulgence. Soon the politico-economic discussion was merged in the concentrations of a more realistic yet more illusory struggle.

'I got ahead of you early in the game,' said Iredale in half an hour's time. 'You were in too great a hurry.'

'Yes, I castled too early.'

At the end of another spell of silence Iredale had won again, and Pillguard admitted he was 'not feeling so well.'

'I got ahead of you again. And that reminds me I got ahead of you in another direction lately. Where's that pretty young dancer you were going to ask me to meet? You've left it too late, my boy. I've met her. I met her at the Savoy.'

'Clara Lehman?'

'The same. Don't tell me there has been such an arrear of work at the office that you haven't been able to see her.'

'It's true all the same. But you met her; I'm very curious. How did you meet her? Was she by herself?'

‘By herself at the Savoy! Why no, there was a bunch of jolly fellows with her.’

Pillguard looked more chagrined than after losing the second game.

‘Was there a fellow called Stanley Goodge?’ he asked.

‘No, not that I saw. There was Duggan, my producer, there was Hardinge trying to offer the Arena to the waiters if they wanted it. There’s an example of what has fallen upon the theatres. It used to be one of the best houses in town, always drew a big crowd, was supposed to be lucky, but now nobody wants it, unless some adventurer like Sawyer takes it up and drops a thousand or so.’

Pillguard seemed pained.

‘The worst of the revolving stage,’ said Iredale irrelevantly, ‘is that it depends entirely on the public’s love of pageant. When the taste changes and the problem play or the bedroom farce becomes the vogue, what are you going to do with it?’

‘Don’t ask me. I don’t want one,’ said Pillguard acidly. ‘But what has that to do with Clara Lehman?’

‘I’ve offered one to Sawyer. I’m sure that in a time of national economy the pageant will soon be considered extravagant. The Lafayette stage is not much larger than the Arena. I believe I’ll be able to sell it to him.’

‘For Clara Lehman to dance on?’

‘Probably. He seems to have her under his wing. That sort of man, if he takes a fancy to an actress, will buy a play or a theatre for her to play in. She’s not an

actress, but there's a good deal of scope for a dancer on the modern stage.'

'This is all new to me,' said Pillguard, looking pale. 'I never heard of the gentleman before. Sawyer?'

'Oh, yes you have, Josiah Sawyer, big property owner and estate agent.'

'Holy Schedule A!' exclaimed the inspector. 'J. Sawyer. I ought to. His accounts are as long as the Secret Doctrine and as involved. What do you know about that?'

'About the Secret Doctrine? Nothing. What's that, an esoteric explanation of the demands of the Inland Revenue? But I see you know J. Sawyer, and if you want to save your young lady from a life of sin you had better rescue her while there is time.'

'Thanks, old man,' said Pillguard wanly. 'You've done me a good turn. I shan't forget it. Sometime I may be able to do as much for you. Sawyer . . . I wonder if you would remember to let me know, supposing the deal comes off, just how much he pays for the stage. I suppose also, he is taking a lease of the Arena. He's a rich man. I suppose his net income works out at between four and five thousand a year just now. He is always buying new property, and lately we discovered quite by accident that he holds the lease of some English shops in Paris. We are holding the information till we get some more. That is why we haven't passed his accounts for the current year.'

'You're wrong there, Pillguard,' said Iredale, mechanically replacing the chess pieces in their box, the

big ones first so that there should be room for all. 'He's the typical business man, straight, blunt, devoid of imagination. I bet he never travelled first class with a third-class ticket.'

'You don't know those plain, blunt, business men as I know them,' said Pillguard. 'But not a word, you understand. Officially I know nothing about him.'

'What do you take me for? Have a cigar!'

That evening Pillguard broke silence and telephoned Clara Lehman. It happened she had no dancing engagement that week, but was dining with her father that night. She was off-hand with Pillguard, disconcertingly so. She could not have lunch with him next day, nor dine with him any night that week. She was 'booked up.'

'But it's urgent. I must see you,' said Pillguard in very serious tones.

Clara seemed to be thinking of something at the other end of the telephone line. She did not answer at once.

'Find a time for me. I'll suit your convenience,' said Pillguard meekly.

'Could you see me tomorrow morning?' asked Clara diffidently.

'I'd make it possible,' said the inspector. 'When?'

'I could give you an hour in the middle of the morning.'

'I'll take the morning off,' said Pillguard decidedly.

'All right. I'll give you a ring at your flat about ten,' said Clara.

She rang off, and the inspector was as pleased with himself as if he had just settled a thorny case and had saved a few hundred pounds for the revenue. He dined at home and smoked three good cigars, and tried to listen to the radio, but his mind was occupied by a pleasant sensation. It had been a great strain on him keeping away from Clara Lehman. He had not been able to kill the thought of her by office work. Constantly the question, what is she doing now? intruded itself upon the daily life of assessment and inquiry. Even his typist, who was so unlike Clara, reminded him of her, and she had actually had the temerity to suggest to him that he had something on his mind. He knew the office had been curious about his relationship with Clara Lehman, and he was thankful to believe that he had laid any gossip which might have started about him and her. But at the same time he knew that he had not banished Clara Lehman from his life, and that without her there was a blank somewhere. Why should he not continue the friendship he had made? There was absolutely no danger in it. She was not laying a trap for him. If she had been would she not have been the first to break the silence and ring him up or write? But she had been dashed cold on the telephone. It would have served him right if she had refused to see him again. A shade of doubt crossed the inspector's mind again. Perhaps if she had it would have been better, better for his peace of mind if he had had the certainty that the episode was closed. Then he could have put her out of his mind for ever

and he would have been at peace. No, that would have been torture. He was glad that she had in effect forgiven him by promising to see him.

These and many other like reflections mingled with the cigar smoke in that bachelor apartment. Henry Ellsworth Pillguard at length disrobed and got into his cream-coloured pyjamas and went to bed, but still the discursive day-dream continued. It may be admitted that he had very little to cause him a sleepless night. But a vacuum chamber in his official life had been pierced, and it had filled with a distillation from the personality, or was it sex, of the dancer. At three in the morning he made the absurd reflection that it needed seven hours to ten o'clock.

When morning at last came it was frosty and foggy. He dressed with more than usual care. He had his bacon and eggs and well-stewed tea; he read his *Manchester Guardian*, which was delivered by a man on a bicycle every morning at eight o'clock. He smoked several cigarettes. He sent a note to the office with the information that he would not be there before luncheon as he was not feeling too well. He watched the clock with misgiving. Being an artiste, a Bohemian, Clara would probably sleep till ten and only remember him about half-past. A vague sun pierced the mist and threw a ghostly radiance on the tablecloth. Pillguard paced up and down the room.

But Clara was punctual. On the stroke of ten the telephone bell rang. Pillguard seized the receiver nervously.

‘It’s going to be a fine day,’ said Clara very cheerfully. ‘What do you say if I motor you out to Richmond Park?’ she asked.

Pillguard was too astonished and delighted to inquire where she would get a car or what exactly she meant. The conversation was brief. ‘All right, I’ll be round for you in half an hour,’ said Clara, and rang off.

Pillguard to his own surprise began to sing. He was just too excited.

Chapter Nine

CLARA in a brown silk dressing-gown busily made coffee, which she transferred to a couple of thermos flasks. There was a picnic basket open on a chair, and she put in rolls and butter and cheese and ham. She smiled to herself at the surprise she was preparing for Pillguard. The day before when he had telephoned she had been far from this agreeable condescension. But she had remembered the car, which was now largely at her disposal. She had had supper with her father and Emily, and they had asked her when they were likely to see their car again. Mr. Goodge had little conscience and not only used the car constantly but used Clara as his chauffeur. He could not drive a car. At first Clara had taken pleasure in showing how well she drove, but the novelty had worn off. Jacques was the type of man who reckoned to pick up a pound whenever he put down ten shillings. It had not taken Clara long to discover that. Pat and Maureen had told her that when they got an engagement Jacques pocketed seventy-five per cent of the fee. As regards her own partnership with him, she was not apprehensive, but she had come to the conclusion that she must stop him from being mean. In any case he

should not do her father and Emily down on the car deal. She had promised to bring the car back to Camden Town next day, and let it remain there for at least ten days. She liked having the car; it made life more interesting, but it should be returned the following evening. Dr. Smith was pleased, and let the matter rest. Emily ceased teasing her about it. 'I'll be using it in the morning,' said she, but she did not say that she had decided to take a day off from the Ham Yard studio and amuse herself with Pillguard.

The inspector did not deserve the trouble she was taking. She knew that. He had treated her badly. He had not been altogether absent from her thoughts during the fortnight of silence, but she had concluded that he had dropped her, and if he had not taken the trouble to telephone she would have assumed that he had, and that would have been the end of an altogether minor relationship. Probably there was no future for a modern girl like herself and an old stick like Pillguard. And yet there was something about him that appealed to her. She liked that lack of self-consciousness which almost amounted to a lack of humour. Clara disliked men with an abundant sense of humour. After a while they inevitably became annoying to her. And she had felt that Pillguard wished to protect her. She was not aware that she was in need of protection, but it was pleasant to have it. Even the most audacious woman likes to have a male protector, and Clara was not audacious. But Mr. Pillguard's silence had not been an encouraging omen. Nor had his behaviour when

they had been together been warm enough to be safely construed as the beginning of friendship. He was rather like a wall plug which did not work, and a lamp that gave no light. But when he did at last telephone and spoke so urgently Clara felt that there was current; only the wires were defective.

She brushed her brown hair back from her temples and quickly donned a comfortable tweed costume, and hastened to the garage with her little picnic basket. Still punctual if a little flurried, she rang Mr. Pill-guard's door-bell at half-past ten, and the impatient inspector, now almost unrecognisable in plus-fours and a golf cap, opened at once as if he had been waiting for her on the mat. There was a strange furtive twinkle in his eyes as if he were running away from someone who was on the watch, and he looked smaller in knickerbockers, like a small boy with a false moustache.

'This *is* a treat,' he exclaimed, sitting himself beside Clara at the wheel. 'You never said you had a motor.'

He spoke as if no silence had intervened. There was no apology such as Clara had expected. It was as if a fortnight's break meant nothing to him.

'Where have you been hiding?' asked Clara, expeditiously skirting a taxi and forging ahead towards the traffic signals.

'I have been buried in office work,' replied Pill-guard.

'You managed to get a morning off today?'

'By risking my official skin,' said the inspector. 'It

may result in a loss to the revenue. I had an important engagement.'

'Really! Then you ought not to have altered your plans. I could have seen you at luncheon-time.'

'You said not. But where are we going? When must you be back?'

Clara speedily reached Hyde Park, and was deliberately uncommunicative, as if she were kidnapping the inspector and he would find out soon enough to what wild region he was bound. Kensington Gardens, Queen's Gate, Onslow Gardens, the Fulham Road. Mr. Pillguard glared at an unfamiliar neighbourhood like a tom cat resolved to remember the way home if he is going to be strayed. It is one of the quick ways out of London, and within half an hour of leaving the door they were on Putney Bridge, looking down on the drab river to which the morning fog still clung.

'I am taking you on a picnic,' said Clara, as they surged up Putney Hill towards Wimbledon Common. The sun shone through a silver veil upon the heath and the pools. Mr. Pillguard seemed greatly surprised. 'I've a picnic basket in the dicky,' she added.

'Are we going far?' asked the inspector in a tremulous whisper. 'I haven't the least idea where we are.'

'What? You don't know Kingston Hill?' said Clara incredulously. 'We are going to feed the deer in Richmond Park.'

'Ah.'

'And ourselves,' added Clara and laughed. 'That is, if you have the time.'

'I am free till two,' said Pillguard seriously:

'I'll get you back by then,' said Clara. 'What did you want to see me about? You said it was very important.'

They entered the park by the Robin Hood Gate. The trees with their lingering leaves dripped dew. The fog just lifted and the grass of the mounting meadows glittered in the sunlight. There was stillness and silence. Beside themselves there was not a soul in the park. They had it to themselves. Even the deer were out of sight, as if hiding behind trees and watching. London with its millionfold activities lay behind them, the massed pounding of typewriters, the bosses dictating to meek stenographers, the shopwalkers asking madam what her next pleasure would be, the omnibuses blundering along with their passengers from bus-stop to bus-stop, the policemen with their extended arms holding the traffic, the bank clerks rapidly fingering coin and ticking off totals as they handed bags of silver and copper over the counter, and at Pillguard's office Miss Loob was carrying on with his correspondence in his absence and preparing a heap of queries for him upon his return, and in Ham Yard Mr. Stanley Goodge rehearsing the twins, morose, bad-tempered, because Miss Lehman had not turned up.

Clara drew up under a black beech tree whose brown leaves were listlessly falling. When she got out of the car she offered her arm to Pillguard, and they began to stroll over the damp grass. 'It's early yet for lunch,' said she. 'We can return to the car later.'

'I was anxious to see you because of something I heard,' said Pillguard, bracing himself. He was conscious of the fact that he was awkward. Clara's gloved hand on the fleshy part of his arm was a complete novelty. Perhaps he ought not to let his arm hang like dead wood, but what to do with it he did not know.

'You'll think me very impertinent, but I did not like to think of you in the company of Josiah Sawyer. That is why I telephoned you.'

He turned and looked into Clara's face as if for reassurance, but the expression there was non-committal.

'What is the matter with him?' she asked.

'He's a business shark.'

Clara held his arm more tightly as they stepped over the dead leaves. 'Your name is Henry, isn't it - Harry Pillguard, you don't mind? Harry Pillguard, why are you so anxious about my friends?' she asked.

'I don't want you to get into financial trouble of any kind.'

'That's nice of you, but don't you think I can look after myself?'

'I have more experience than you have. And then it's my business. I make it my business to know financial bad hats.'

'And to protect innocent young ladies from them. Whoever heard of an income-tax collector who was a knight-errant?'

'I'm not a collector,' objected Pillguard, deeply hurt.

'But you are a knight-errant. Don't say no. I want you to be. I like men who are knight-errants.'

'I'm far from being that,' said Pillguard sadly. 'I doubt if any of the knights of the Round Table ever made assessments or bothered their heads about an income-tax return.'

'Sir Kay the Seneschal,' said Clara blithely. 'Don't you remember him? But of course I would not care for you to be an absurd knight-errant driving about the country rescuing virgins who were not in the least danger. Thanks for your intervention, Sir Harry, but I'm not really in need of rescue at the moment. Mr. Sawyer is a business acquaintance of Mr. Stanley Goodge. Our relationship is a formal business one. The most he has done for me is give me flowers.'

'He has given you flowers?' exclaimed Pillguard aghast. 'You accepted them?'

'I always accept flowers,' said Clara easily. 'I love them. I hope you don't object.'

'I haven't the right to object,' answered Pillguard at once. 'I have been presuming on a very short acquaintance with you. That's what it comes to, and I'm a bit of a fool.'

'All knight-errants are. I like a man who admits freely that he is a bit of a fool. The young men nowadays are so wise.' Clara sighed reflectively. 'But you mean, if you had known me longer, say a whole year, you think you could prohibit flowers entirely?'

'From such a man as Sawyer, yes. But of course I would see that you were regularly supplied with flowers,' he added.

'You'd give a standing order at the florists?'

'Certainly.'

'I'll keep you up to that,' said Clara challengingly, and Mr. Pillguard smiled broadly. He had a mind which worked logically within limits. He was reasoning as he talked, and had arrived at a conclusion which was flattering to his self-esteem. But Clara was also logical in her way.

'That means you would like to be the only man who had the right to send me flowers,' said she. 'Perhaps we've gone far enough.'

'Have I gone too far?' asked Pillguard nervously.

'I meant we had better go back to the car, and then you can tell me more. You would never go too far. I will reward you with hot coffee. Then we can take what is left of our bread and drive to another part and find the deer.'

But Pillguard did not continue the subject over the picnic basket, and he learned no more of the doings of Mr. Sawyer. Clara did not tell him that that gentleman had offered her a flat, nor did she vouchsafe further information as to the doings of Jacques, who was for the time being entirely obliterated from her mind. She played hostess to Pillguard with much playfulness, and he was greatly charmed. Clara looked at him roguishly and wished to trim off the ends of his moustache so that she could see what his mouth looked like,

but she did not tell him that. He was unapproachable in that direction.

‘I hope you are enjoying it,’ said she, as if she had suddenly suspected him of pretence.

‘I never enjoyed a meal more in my life,’ said the inspector, stuffing a large quantity of bread and a little ham into his mouth.

The hot coffee warmed Clara’s feet, which had got cold on the grass, and warmed up Mr. Pillguard, who had the temerity to place his hand on hers and hold it for a moment in admiration.

‘Small hands and small feet go together,’ said Clara, extending a silken leg with well-turned ankle. Pillguard’s pure gaze rested for a moment on the garter above her knee, and then on the well-developed muscle of her calf. Then he looked at his own legs, muffled in thick woollen stockings. His calves certainly lacked contour compared with hers.

‘Some men would give a good deal for your legs,’ said he.

Clara laughed, and he was at once dismayed. ‘Don’t misunderstand me,’ he said. ‘I meant that a shapely leg was an asset to a man in plus-fours. Of course, your legs are more than an asset, they are your stock-in-trade.’

Clara was quietly amused by this, but did not offer any comment. She retired her leg discreetly from his gaze and began to wipe the cups and replace them in the basket, placing what was left of the bread in a paper bag, which she stowed in Mr. Pillguard’s pocket.

There was nothing particularly to admire in the way she tidied up after the picnic, but Mr. Pillguard watched her admiringly. There is something fascinating about a woman's fingers when she is handling cups and saucers, and Pillguard had lived so long out of woman's company that all Clara did was in the nature of novelty. The petty adventure of an escape from the office desk and a picnic in Richmond Park with a pretty lady was becoming exaggerated in his imagination, as if already he figured himself as the hero of a romance.

'Why do you watch me so intently?' asked Clara.

'Mayn't I? It's a pleasure,' said he.

She looked at him warmly.

'Why did you desert me for the last fortnight? I missed you badly,' she said softly.

'Did you miss me?' he asked. 'How was I to know? You did not telephone.'

Clara offered him a cigarette and herself lit one.

'Perhaps I ought to have phoned you,' she said seriously, blowing a puff of smoke into the air. 'But you hated seeing me with Mr. Goodge and I thought you would not see me again. It's not worth bothering about a man if he keeps taking offence. And I've got thick skinned. So many men have told me on a Tuesday that they adored me and have forgotten about me by Friday. They breathe in my face during a dance and say "I know your type, let me teach you how to love," then they go back to their table and forget about me. I've learned to discount everything a man says by eighty-five per cent.'

‘Not in my case, I hope,’ said Pillguard in astonishment.

‘No,’ said Clara. ‘In your case I might add something. If you said you liked me I might take it to mean you loved me. If you said you’d like to be a father to me, I might take it to mean that you’d like to be the father of my children.’

Now Pillguard guffawed, and for the first time she saw all his white teeth and that was a surprise to her. She saw that his teeth were his own, and that, despite his tobacco habit, they were very clean.

‘You quote me above par,’ said he.

‘You have big reserves,’ said Clara smiling.

‘Personally,’ said the inspector, ‘I am opposed to the practice of depriving shareholders of the best part of their dividends and adding substantially to reserve. I think you are rash in putting a high estimate on my capital value, but I would rather you explained it by saying that I was quoted cum dividend.’

‘You are too funny. What about me? Do you think I am cum dividend or ex dividend?’

‘Cum, cum,’ said the inspector.

Clara did not laugh.

‘If I said I loved you, what then? How would you interpret that statement?’ asked he.

‘It would mean “I cannot live without you,” but you have not said it yet.’

‘Put it at that,’ said Pillguard. ‘Perhaps you would not be far wrong.’

Clara looked at him closely with narrowed eyes. She

did not rebuke him, and the moment had come when he might conceivably have offered to kiss her, but he did not. She would not have allowed that, but she was disappointed. He was backward. That was an agreeable virtue. But virtue is not always welcome in the opposite sex.

‘If you like it, Harry, you and I are going to be friends,’ said she, and patted him on one knee. ‘Don’t let’s say anything more than we intend.’

And with that they drove off to find the deer and give them the remains of the picnic. Then they went to the Star and Garter, and each drank a pint of beer. Clara drove him back to town and delivered him at his office on the stroke of time.

Chapter Ten

CLARA invited Pillguard to tea with Dr. Smith and Emily on Sunday afternoon. When Dr. Smith heard that his daughter was bringing an inspector of taxes to tea he could not forbear to make a number of jests. 'Bring him; I've a number of questions I'd like to put to him,' said he.

'But he's not responsible for the taxes, pa. He's only a paid official. Civil Servants have nothing to do with making the laws,' objected Clara.

'They only enforce them, eh? Well, bring him, bring your inquisitor along. I've longed to meet one of them and give him a piece of my mind.'

Clara apprehended verbal strife when the two should meet, for her father when he got an idea into his head could be very pigheaded. But the meeting did not turn out as she expected. The two men took to one another admirably, and soon engaged in a long conversation on taxes and politics, to which the two sisters could not be much more than complaisant listeners.

The portly silver teapot, with its cosy, the willow-pattern china, the sugar-tongs which Clara declared she had outlived -- 'A lady may use her fingers,' the Sally Lunn browned and buttered, told of a tradition still

holding good in London homes. The tea was rich and black such as only India can supply. And there was cream. The round mahogany table was tastefully arranged. The entertainment was tea. There were no cocktails, and Dr. Smith had refused to allow the radio to desecrate his home. *Hymns Ancient and Modern* was open on the piano at 'Hark, hark, my soul, angelic songs are swelling,' but that was the only suggestion of music. There were books, it is true, on shelves, an array of detective stories, for with these the doctor whiled away many an idle hour. The parlour was pleasant. It did not look like a come-down in the world. The gentility of Camden Road had been carried into the neighbourhood of Kentish Town.

Clara was happy on these rare occasions when she could risk destroying the legend that she had been born in Vienna by introducing some friend from town to Dr. Smith. It was her way of showing that she was quite respectable. In her way she was proud of the fact that her father was a doctor. The profession of doctor is the most respectable that there is, but showing one's legs in a night-club is not entirely respectable, even if a girl does it artistically. In general her friends were awed by the doctor, and called him 'sir,' but they did not think that tea under the circumstances was over-jolly. Mr. Goodge had proved an exception. He flattered Emily and talked quite learnedly with the old man about diet and diabetes, and finished by making a profitable deal to use their motor.

Mr. Pillguard was nervous when Clara introduced

him as 'Harry.' It seemed to him for a moment that he was being called upon to ask Dr. Smith for his daughter. The snare of matrimony was open before him, and he was walking into it with his eyes open. He was all the more relieved when the worthy doctor broke into a tirade on the iniquity of the income tax. He accepted two lumps of sugar from Emily, and cream.

'This country gets more Chinese every day,' said Dr. Smith. 'The Chinese for centuries were taxed to death. Everything they earned was stolen from them by the mandarins, or it was before the revolution. Every political party in England is in favour of more taxes. The Conservatives could think of nothing better than to pension widows, and now they will tax food. The Liberals, who in Gladstone's day were reproached for their national policy of Retrenchment—"cheese-paring," it was called by their enemies—are now squandermaniacs and want to add extensively to the national debt to finance schemes of road-building. Labour wants "pay or maintenance" and everything else it can filch out of our pockets. When there is an election I do not know who to vote for because all three parties are thinking of new ways of raising taxes.'

'Perhaps you overlook the benefits that come out of the taxes,' said Pillguard mildly. 'Education, sanitation, police, military protection.'

'Our education is not worth what we pay for it,' said Dr. Smith decidedly. 'We are merely producing

masses of unskilled labour in the schools. We pay more and more for education, but the number of useless adolescents increases all the while. I believe we were on the whole a better educated nation in 1870 than we are today.'

'What would you do?'

'I would make education strictly vocational. At least half the schools I would make into workshops.'

'But that would cost money. That would add to the taxes.'

'I do not mind paying when I see results. But the money for that could easily be found without increasing taxes. I would reduce the Board of Trade to a committee of six, with a staff of twelve clerks. I would do the same with the Lunacy Commission, the Home Office, the Colonial Office and several other departments.'

'And the Inland Revenue?'

'I would reduce that, too. A revenue stamp on all receipts would meet the case.'

'Father has thought it all out,' said Clara laughing. 'He would certainly abolish your job if he had the power.'

'You laugh,' said Emily, 'but the situation is serious. Now the cost of everything is going up, too. First they said they'd put on extra taxes because the cost of living had gone down. Now after the taxes the cost of living is going up.'

Pillguard was not laughing. On the contrary, his whole bearing was sympathetic. 'That was due to the

fall in the sterling exchange,' said he. 'That's why we need the Board of Trade.'

'The Board did not save the pound,' objected Dr. Smith.

'But it could,' said Pillguard engagingly. 'Now I have my programme for that if you'd care to listen to it. I would take off the stamp duty on cheques. Then people would pay all their small bills by cheque instead of in cash. That would cause a large decrease in the use of currency.'

Dr. Smith, taking his third cup of tea from Emily, murmured that the removal of the duty on cheques would not effect much.

'Every little helps,' said the inspector. 'Just as I would not allow M.P.s to travel on the railway at the public charge.'

'I'm with you there,' interrupted Dr. Smith.

'I would use the provisions of the law against the Irish Sweepstakes. It is scandalous to allow the money of the poor to pour into Dublin.'

'That hits me,' said Emily. 'I love a gamble.'

'But you never win anything,' grumbled the doctor. 'That's good. I agree with you. It's a scandal.'

'Then until exports balance imports I would place a bar on American films. I would do the same with American tobacco. Finally, I would enter into negotiations with the Farm Board of America to buy up their surplus wheat and cotton at a fair price. We have unlimited need for these commodities. The Government should emulate Russia and enter the world markets

as a purchaser on a colossal scale. I would abolish the tax on petrol and wherever possible I would commute vexatious petty taxation such as the Entertainment Tax for a lump sum in income tax.'

'I suppose we should then be paying ten shillings in the pound,' said Dr. Smith, but he was impressed by Pillguard's list of remedies. 'You ought to print that as a pamphlet and send it to the Prime Minister. He has obtained a doctor's mandate. What he needs now is a prescription.'

'Pillguard's Pill,' exclaimed Clara.

Emily now produced whisky and soda for the men. That had not been intended as part of the tea, but the doctor was now in such a good humour that a warmer mead of hospitality did not seem out of keeping with the occasion. Mr. Pillguard asked permission to smoke a cigar, and offered one to Dr. Smith. He also was in a good humour, and felt very much at home. It gave him pleasure to be understood. People who take up one's pet ideas and agree are much more intelligent than those who criticise. He saw also that he had impressed Clara, and there was a warm feeling about his heart.

The doctor touched the bottle of Haig with his fingers.

'You'd hardly believe it,' said he, 'but this costs me another ten pounds a year in tax.'

'It could be commuted for seven pounds ten on the income tax,' said the inspector. 'And if we took the tax off whisky much less brandy would be drunk, and

that again would help us in the struggle against the franc.'

'But think of the tipsy men there would be in the street,' objected Emily.

'Not more than there used to be when whisky was three-and-six a bottle.'

'Then your car, what with road tax and tax on petrol, must cost not less than eighteen pounds a year in taxes. That could be commuted for thirteen pounds extra on the income-tax bill.'

'I don't quite see that,' said the doctor. 'The government would lose five pounds on that.'

'Income tax costs less to collect than any other tax,' said the inspector. 'At the same time it is a tax capable of adjustment to the pocket of the taxpayer. If a poor man has a car he enjoys no abatement of road tax or petrol tax. He must pay on the same scale as a rich man. But that is obviously unfair. You are a doctor. You have served your country well, as all doctors do. You retired before the heavy taxes and the fall of the pound. In my opinion you ought to receive generous allowances. You are in quite a different position from the patriotic munition manufacturer who during the war took up a large block of war bonds. I am for ruthlessly pulling away the curtain and exposing who are our big economic war shirkers.'

'Really, Mr. Pillguard, you surprise me,' said Dr. Smith affably. 'When my daughter told me you were an inspector of taxes, I felt as if an enemy were entering the house. Now I feel you are on our side, and if I

had any annual accounts to submit I should not mind bringing them to you and answering all the questions, although I have thought that a scandalous imposition on the rights of the individual, little short of a new Spanish Inquisition with thumbscrews and all the appurtenances of the torture chamber.'

'Ah,' said Pillguard. 'We are misrepresented by the Press. Believe me, I should do my best to knock off a few pounds from the assessment. My motto is "let the honest folk pay less; make the dodgers pay more."'

'Yes,' said Clara. 'I told you so, pa; that's what he did for me when I went up to see him. But you would not believe me.'

'Father thought Clara had just fascinated you with her baby eyes,' said Emily.

'No one can be more of an official than I am,' said the inspector. 'The revenue must be safeguarded. I never depart from that point of view. But I am just, or at least I try to be.'

So Mr. Pillguard's visit was a success. The conversation lasted till half-past six, and then the doctor and the inspector shook hands on the most amiable terms. Emily hoped he would come again soon. Clara was pleased, and when Mr. Pillguard asked her to have dinner with him she did not demur. It involved her taking the car back to Dial Street for the night, but the doctor would not hear of their going by bus. 'Why go by bus when we have a motor?' So they drove off together, and the car returned prematurely to the use of Mr. Stanley Goodge.

Clara and Pillguard dined in Soho, and afterwards went to her flat, which now seemed the natural thing to do. There occurred there an experience unique in the humdrum life of Mr. Pillguard. 'Young men will do't if they come to't,' sang the crazy Ophelia. The inspector's physical nature gave evidence of its virility. Mr. Pillguard was not a young man, but he was young enough. Under the red tape and Schedules A, B, C, D, E, lurked God's primary exhibit. This did not surprise Clara, for, despite his backwardness, she had surmised it all along. In her experience the bifurcate trousered species gave certain known reactions to female charm. But Pillguard himself was surprised and felt a sense of self-betrayal in what he had done, but he also felt intoxication from his own action. Clara lay on the couch and her eyes sparkled. Her cheeks glowed and glowed again, as if fanned by some mysterious air. Her lips invited that ravaging black moustache, and Pillguard, sitting beside her in the coign of her waist, looked at her with agitation, and instead of asking her forgiveness for his first indiscretion, kissed her again. He liked it.

Chapter Eleven

NEXT day at the office Miss Loob remarked that the inspector was busy trying to compose a letter all by himself and without her aid, but was evidently in difficulties, because he had torn up his letter twice and thrown the fragments in the waste-paper basket. And he was most secretive about it. Whenever she came to his desk he covered up what he had written with his blotting-pad. There were several cases demanding his official attention, but he had irritably put them to one side. This was unlike him, and her curiosity was aroused. At twelve o'clock he still had not finished this difficult letter, but he had an engagement to interview a retired schoolmaster who had been discovered to be cheating the revenue. A grey-headed old gentleman entered, and the inspector treated him roughly and unsympathetically, venting his irritation on the taxpayer. The offence was not very heinous, nor did it entail a great deal of money. The schoolmaster, since he had retired, had been making a certain amount of money by competitions in the newspapers. He had told in Greek hexameters the story of the nations' struggle for gold. He had concocted the mottoes for crests of new peers. One that won a prize

as the best suggestion was for Lord Passfield: 'Electric cars stop here by request.' He had written the best limerick composed by a boy of twelve. This successful practice had been going on for a number of years, but he had never divulged his earnings on his income-tax form. It was risky, because the name and address of prize winners are usually printed in the papers, if only to give evidence of the authenticity of the competitions.

The old man leaned on a heavy stick and would not sit down, but lowered into the face of the inspector.

'I never heard that prizes were taxable,' said he. 'Once, it is many, many years ago, I won ten shillings in an egg-and-spoon race at a village sports. You'll tell me that I ought to have declared it as income.'

'Be that as it may,' said Pillguard, 'I take it we have now a full return of your undisclosed earnings for the past five years. I suppose you know that you are liable for three times the gross tax at the full rate? You are also liable to prosecution for perjury. You may think yourself fortunate that our hands are full at the moment, and we cannot use the full rigour of the law against petty defaulters like yourself. You will be obliged to sign this statement that you have made a false return for the years indicated.'

The inspector handed him a document and placed pen and ink at the old man's disposal.

'I flatly refuse,' said the schoolmaster. 'If I made an inaccurate return, I did so in ignorance, and I do not believe any jury would convict.'

'I ought not to have to tell an educated man that

ignorance of the law cannot be held as justification. You will see that by this document you agree to pay a lump sum of twenty pounds. If it is taken to law and you lose you stand to pay the full sum for which you are liable.'

The old man took out his spectacles and read the agreement through. Then he picked up the pen and dashed off an almost illegible signature.

'You will receive the notice of supplementary assessment in due course,' said Pillguard, who was in a hurry to get rid of him and continue writing his letter to Clara.

Pillguard did not look up from his desk. The schoolmaster grasped his stick more firmly and stared angrily across the room.

'I've read of Scrooge in Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, but I never met him in the flesh until now,' he growled.

'That will do,' said the inspector. 'You are a schoolmaster. You must be about seventy years of age, and yet you are not ashamed to win a limerick competition, pretending to be a boy of twelve.'

The old man put his ancient felt hat on his head and stumped out of the room, striking the floor with his heavy stick as if he were a blind man.

Mr. Pillguard finished his letter, which, despite his pains, remained hopelessly official. It began with the word 'Re,' and contained both the words 'notwithstanding' and 'nevertheless,' and such phrases as 'you will see by the annexed' and 'in the contrary case

let us agree to preserve the *status quo ante*.' What was annexed was a statement of Mr. Pillguard's income and of his liabilities, and the real core of the letter was a proposal of marriage contingent upon Clara's willingness to give up her profession and content herself with being merely the wife of a 'humble inspector of taxes.'

Miss Loob pieced together the fragments of his frustrated efforts gathered from the waste-paper basket, and the staff laughed considerably during the luncheon interval. When Mr. Pillguard returned, nursing his umbrella and staring at the floor, young Mr. Shanks whistled, 'He's in love, you can tell by the look in his eye,' but this was lost on the inspector, who was not familiar with music-hall airs.

Mr. Pillguard had posted his letter, but was consumed by anxious doubt. No sooner had he dropped it in the letter-box than he repented and wished he could get the letter back again. He knew it was stilted; he wished to rewrite it. Or it might have been better to write no letter at all. But a letter fallen into a letter-box is beyond recall. It cannot be got back by waiting for the postman and saying, 'I posted that by mistake, please hand it back to me.'

Contrary to custom, Mr. Pillguard was concentrating after writing a letter rather than before, and it was not good for his nerves. Neither the office nor the taxpayer had a very pleasant time that afternoon. Now that he had written to Clara, it dawned on him that he ought not to see her until she had answered his letter. She

would receive his letter by the last post, and might conceivably write to him in reply at once. In that case he might receive an answer in the morning. But that was unreasonable. Even if she had no doubt in her heart she would hardly write back to say so by return of post.

Pleasure and pain, apprehension and anticipation, seethed in his brain, and he was racked by doubt. That evening he made the mistake of dining alone. It would have been much better for him had he sought the company of one of his male cronies, even had it meant his taking him into his confidence regarding the step which he had taken. But he was low-spirited. He felt that he would be refused and that in any case his letter of proposal was premature. He went over the contents of his letter in his mind and it seemed a mistake to have given her the details of his income. He was sure she would be disillusioned. She must think he earned much more than six hundred a year. He was a poor match for a brilliant young woman who went about with rich men like Josiah Sawyer. But if she accepted him she would have nothing more to do with men like Sawyer and Goodge. A flicker of triumph passed across his face. Ah, but life would be dull for her with him. It could not satisfy her. She might accept him and then prove unfaithful. How could he tell what she was doing while he was at the office all day? Perhaps he had made a fatal mistake. He ought at least to have taken time to get to know her much better. On the whole, when he went to bed that night, he hoped that she would

not answer him or that she would say resolutely 'No.' But next morning when the postman brought no letter he was thrown into a state of fretful anxiety.

Had he but known Clara was Sawyer's guest at the theatre that night. They viewed *The Unskilful Lover* from the stalls. After the theatre they went to the Mayfair to dance, and it was about one in the morning when Sawyer brought Clara back to Dial Street. She saw a letter waiting for her, but did not open it till the morning. Mr. Sawyer had proved a tiring dancer, but he had been liberal, and had pressed upon her a five-pound note as 'part thanks' for the pleasure of her company. This she had refused, though not with scorn. Under certain circumstances she might have accepted it; for instance if he had made her lose an engagement by going out with him. But that was not so. Unfortunately she had no work. She awaited the development of Mr. Goodge's programme. Mr. Sawyer had also given her the address of a flat at Buckingham Gate which he said she could have at the same rent as she was paying in Dial Street. That, she felt, needed consideration, though actually she was quite comfortable where she was.

About the time when Mr. Pillguard was seated in his office, nervously trying to free his throat from the sharp starched edge of a clean collar, Clara was reading his letter of the day before.

'Poor Harry,' she murmured, as, having read it for the second time, she put it down on her dressing-table, and went on brushing her hair. But as she mechanically

drew the hard brush through her brown tresses, and looked at her face in the glass, it occurred to her that Mr. Pillguard had in effect asked her to give up her profession and her friends. A hard dent, or was it a pucker, appeared in the girlish face in the mirror. The thought of his antagonism towards Jacques came to her mind. It was that which made her cross. She did not sit down and write to the inspector that she thought him very selfish, but in a matter-of-fact way made her breakfast, put on her hat and coat and went to the garage for the car, which she drove forthwith to Ham Yard.

Pillguard did not receive his answer that day nor next day, and was plunged into a state of great despair. He fell into a mood of self-disparagement, which his contact with taxpayers did not heal. Miss Loob surmised that he had had an unfavourable reply, and was, if he had only known, extremely sympathetic. She admired the way he dealt with the cases he had in hand. Pillguard wished to be lenient, but against his impulse he was more severe than usual. He at length disposed of the case of a taxpayer who had made so many contrary statements that he was nicknamed Mr. Yes-I-Mean-No. This was a muddle-headed seller of builders' accessories who often let himself pay more tax than he need through simple stupidity in making up his accounts. On this occasion Mr. Pillguard let him pay more. But he felt he had been harsh. He remembered what the schoolmaster had called him, 'Scrooge.' That name 'Scrooge' had recurred to him many times, and

he even imagined himself receiving a curt letter from Miss Lehman: 'No, Mr. Scrooge, I can't.'

Sitting at his desk one afternoon, he was paying no attention to the bundle of official forms in front of him. He had thrown away his cigarette and was staring into space. He was not aware of the presence of Miss Loob, who was considering him with kind attention. Nor did he notice at once that as she stooped to arrange the papers in front of him she softly stroked his hand. His eyes rested on her for a moment. She was looking at him closely.

'I shouldn't worry about her. She's not worth it,' she whispered absent-mindedly, and hastened to her own room with the other typists.

This remark brought Pillguard back to a clearer state of mind. He started. He almost said 'damn,' which was not a word commonly found in his vocabulary. What could Miss Loob know about it? Was he talking to himself? He shivered at the thought. Was his distress so clearly written on his features? He felt he must pull himself together, and he resolutely concentrated on the papers in front of him and began to work again. But he did not ask Miss Loob what she had meant, or how she had learned he was in love. When next she appeared at his desk he smiled in a friendly way, as if her sympathy had been helpful. Perhaps it had. To all appearances he had banished Clara from his mind for the rest of the day.

On his pad he wrote the word 'refresher,' and the word caught his eye repeatedly as he dealt with case

after case and put it aside. When he left the office he whispered to himself the word 'refresher,' and he went to a florist's and ordered a dozen yellow roses to be sent to Miss Clara Lehman, and sat there and wrote on green bordered shop notepaper the words 'A postscript from Harry'—that was all—and left it to be sent with the flowers.

It was not far to go. The florist at once sent a boy with the roses. They could not have got to Clara sooner had Pillguard taken them himself. He was dressing for dinner when his telephone rang. In his stiff shirt, but with his braces hanging to the floor, the inspector hastened to the phone.

'I have just received the yellow roses. They are lovely,' said a soft voice.

'You like them? When can I come and see you? I sent you a letter, did you get it? No, I hardly expected you to answer it, at least not at once. It was stupidly worded. But I've been in suspense lest you should forbid me to see you again. Oh, cheers! I'm so relieved. What are you doing now? Can you have dinner with me?'

Mr. Pillguard's face as he listened to her reply underwent a change of expression and became dour and suspicious. 'I'm sorry,' said he, still listening. Clara went on to say that if he did not mind talking to her while she dressed he could come along at once, and then take her in a taxi to the Berkeley. Mr. Pillguard's face underwent another change. In absurd haste he clutched at his braces and pulled them over his shoulders as he replaced the receiver on the hook.

It did not take him long that evening to tie his black bow. In five minutes he was dressed and had put on hat and coat and was out at the door. He hailed a taxi and went at once to Dial Street.

Clara, wearing Turkish slippers and a brown silk dressing-gown tightly tied at the waist, was mixing a cocktail when he arrived. His yellow roses in a mass were in one vase on her dressing-table, and were gaily reflected in her mirror. The blinds were drawn and the electric light flooded upon a scene of some disorder, for Clara had evidently just stepped out of her day attire, and a brown frock lay untidily across the sofa.

Clara greeted him with a gay, dimpling, almost saucy, smile. Mr. Pillguard was relieved, because she seemed so obviously pleased to see him, and greeted him as 'Sir Harry.' And she was in *négligé*; that confirmed him in a sense of intimacy. Clara left him sitting on the edge of the sofa sipping his gin and vermouth, and vanished for a moment into her bedroom.

'But I must get down to brass tacks,' reflected the inspector, becoming for a moment severe.

'You must fasten me up behind,' cried Clara, emerging from her room in a frock of pale rose organdie much pleated and fluted and all undone up the back.

Far from getting down to brass tacks, Mr. Pillguard had to get down to silk-covered hooks. He put down his cocktail glass and she sat on the bony tops of his knees. His inexperienced fingers fumbled with the invisible fastenings. His eyes rested uneasily on the

white slip which covered her body. He was thrilled and displeased at the same time.

‘This is new,’ said he.

‘Yes, I bought it in Russell Street, at one of those shops where men take their mistresses, being sure they won’t meet their wives there. I saw it in the window as I was passing. I said to myself, I must have that, and I went in at once and bought it. It fits as if made for me, doesn’t it?’

‘You evidently intend to make a hit with someone tonight,’ said the inspector in a hard voice. ‘Who is it?’

‘I was at Celestine’s last night, and I wore it for the first time. Do you know what one of the guests said to me about it? He said: “You must have a lot of poetry in you to wear a frock like that.” His name was Henry, too. Aren’t you jealous? You are. I knew you would be. He asked me to dine with him tonight, and be sure to wear the same dress. I believe he is in love with it. It’s a Paris model. I thought it made me look like a depraved flapper, but he thought it full of poetry. What do you say, Harry Pillguard, knight of the Round Table?’

‘I don’t understand why you should wish to look like a depraved flapper.’

‘One has to dress to please the men,’ said Clara, easing up gently to release her hips. ‘There are still two more hooks. That’s fine. You are Sir Galahad. I haven’t another man friend who wouldn’t have taken a liberty under the circumstances. How do I look?’

It was certainly a daring frock. The fluting of the material over her hips made her look as if she wore a small bustle. It was designed to convey the grace of an old-fashioned design combined with the lascivious abandon of modern dress. Mr. Pillguard could not deny that she looked well in it.

'And now for a taxi,' she exclaimed, looking at her watch.

Mr. Pillguard had not been able to get in one word about the subject that affected him most. Only in the cab, when they were hastening along Shaftesbury Avenue, after an awkward silence, did he come to the point.

'And the answer to my letter is "no"?' said he softly.

Clara did not answer him.

'All right. I understand,' said the inspector in a barely audible whisper.

'It was a selfish letter,' said Clara. 'I was surprised.'

'How, selfish?'

'You were thinking of yourself, not of me, when you wrote it. You know the song: "I love you just a little bit more than myself, that's all"? You cannot say that, and so I do not believe you are really in love with me. Also I am not thinking of getting married, not unless I go broke. Then, of course, I might need someone to support me.'

'That's terrible,' exclaimed Pillguard in anguish. 'I can't stand it. Let me get out of the cab. My life and happiness are at an end.'

Clara started apprehensively, for Pillguard had made a sudden motion, and opened the door of the taxi, evidently intending to fling himself out of it while it was in swift motion. She clutched at him violently and pulled him back into his seat. 'No, no,' she said. 'Harry, how foolish you are.'

But they had reached the Berkeley. The taxi halted and Pillguard politely handed Clara out. He paid the driver, refused to shake hands with Clara, and hurriedly plunged into the mass of Piccadilly traffic. Clara stood for a moment looking after him, and then entered the hotel.

Chapter Twelve

MR. PILLEGUARD walked home like a man in a dream, and suddenly found himself at his own door, though he could not remember a street or a person or an incident on the way. His belated dinner, which was sent up, was not hot, the wine was tasteless. Only his cigar brought him some satisfaction. He sat and smoked and asked himself the question: how had he been selfish? He did not think it selfish to have offered to surrender his bachelordom and share his shorn income with another. He believed he could have accepted it if she had said that she was used to more comfort than he could give her. That dress must have cost a pretty penny. Or if she had said that she could spend half his income on dress alone. Still, she did not spend as much as that. He knew her income. She had divulged everything. Unless, of course, she received presents from men. Probably she did, and he was a fool. He had fallen for a gold-digger. Substantial presents such as dresses and jewellery ought to be brought in for assessment. A woman receives a pearl necklace from an admirer. She can at once take it to a pawnbroker and raise a considerable sum of money.

Strictly speaking that is income. But he remembered that Clara had said that she bought the frock herself, and he believed her. The thought of her sitting on his knee came back to him, but without pleasure. What had struck him most at the time was the thinness of the material. And the slip was of the finest silk. As far as touch was concerned she could not have been more nearly naked. She looked dressed, but when you held her in your arms there seemed to be nothing between you and her body. And this ass who said she must have poetry in her was going to maul her about for the rest of the evening. Poetry? What did he mean by that? What was poetry? Something children learned at school. How easily a woman can be fooled by a word. He put his fat hand on her hips while they danced and said, 'Ah, you have poetry.' Silly ass! Why had he not asked his name? These men who are throwing their money about taking dancers to expensive restaurants are usually cheating the revenue.

Clara, with an elderly but sentimental poet, was having a pleasant dinner at the Berkeley. One can stand a great deal of soft talk when the dinner is good, and this other Henry had told her that she reminded him of Mary Queen of Scots in that dress. 'I suppose I should remind you much more of her if I were to take it off,' said Clara audaciously. 'When did you see her last?'

'Don't laugh. She was the queen of love,' said the poet with solemnity, drawling the word 'love' as if it had two syllables. 'And love is the greatest thing in

life,' he went on. 'When love ceases in a man's life, he is getting near the end.'

Clara was certain that that sad reflection had occurred to the poet fairly often, but she did not say so. She was thinking of the rebellious Pillguard, and wondering whether he had got safely home.

'When I saw you last night I had a strange sensation, as if I were on the verge of a great love,' said the poet. 'Such a moment only occurs five or six times in a man's life, and it is something he always remembers. You filled me with your electricity from head to foot. I could not sleep. If you believe me, at three this morning I got up and wrote a poem.'

Something like an old tear appeared in one of the eyes of the poet, perhaps a tear that had often appeared before. It did not fall. It returned to the eye for future use. But that eye remained a trifle groggy and gave a melancholy and strained cast to the face. Clara was annoyed, because in her experience lovers who cried had usually proved tiresome. The night before at Celestine's the poet had been gay and gallant, and Clara had thought him a witty and experienced man of the world. But there are men who need the presence of other men to help them to shine. Looking at him, Clara felt she had been unfair to Pillguard, and directly after dinner, while waiting for the coffee, she went and telephoned him.

'I rang up just to know whether you got home safely,' she said.

'Yes, I'm at the flat,' answered a dead voice.

‘I’m speaking from the Berkeley. I’ve left my poet to come and talk to you. Please don’t take what I said too much to heart.’

‘All right.’

Pillguard was unresponsive to her penitent mood. She put the receiver back, sighed her boredom with the world, and returned to her table.

Pillguard was also penitent when she rang off. ‘What a fool I was!’ he exclaimed. He wished to call her back, but realised that would be difficult. But he was for the moment relieved. Clara had cared enough to ring him up. She had been apprehensive. What did she think? Did she imagine that he was likely to go and commit suicide because she had turned him down? He laughed outright. That, at least, had been far from his mind. An inspector of taxes commits suicide, how funny! Disappointed in love! He recalled that Inspector Myers of the Whitechapel survey had put his head in a gas oven. But that was through worry, overwork. He had tried to make every little Jewish shopkeeper tell the truth about his business, and it had broken him. Another Scrooge!

Scrooge? The inspector was surprised at his own reflection. No, Myers was one of the martyrs of the service. He was a martyr to the Inland Revenue. He had worried himself to death to bring in a few extra thousands to the Government, so that some potty Chancellor of the Exchequer, who knew nothing about taxes, could say: ‘We are pleased to report, for the financial year ended, a surplus of . . .’ Not having

read the *Christmas Carol*, Pillguard was in doubt as to the identity of Scrooge, but he assumed it was a nickname for a man who applied the screw. His defence was: We are called upon to apply the screw, and we apply it. Our profession does not affect us as men. Just as the hangman plays with his children in the evening, and the judge after he puts on the black hat goes to his club to have tea. And yet, Pillguard mused, perhaps it does. Once when he had gone to a phrenologist a young lady ran her fingers lightly through his hair and said: 'You are a government official. You have a passion for figures. Your sense of the sublime is limited.' How did she know all that? It was not guesswork. His job was written all over his face and had come out in bumps on his skull. So a man who applied the screw every day of his life did tend to become a Scrooge. Perhaps that was what Clara meant when she called him selfish.

Mr. Pillguard lit a fresh cigar. He was not now suffering as he had been before Clara had rung. He was more at ease if a shade more mental. 'But am I selfish?' he asked. 'I am hard, yes; pertinacious, efficient. I know I am efficient. But that does not mean that I am selfish. I want her for myself and for myself alone, without any confounded poets hanging round. But that is human. We are not living in Russia. Of course a man whom she met for the first time yesterday could not mean very much to her. It was sporting of her to get up from dinner and telephone

me. She had been thinking of me all the while. She must care for me a little.'

The inspector slowly worked himself round to a point when he was happy again. He remembered that Clara had not actually refused his offer of marriage. She had merely said he was selfish. This came upon him as a discovery. He felt reprieved. He took a new lease of hope. He was convinced that Clara would not remain long with the poet. She would plead that she did not feel very well, and would go home early. Or she would telephone him again. No, that would be too much. He must telephone her. It was his turn.

At eleven o'clock he tried to telephone, but as usual at that hour of the night there were long periods of delay and doubtful buzzing and the preoccupied voice of a man who seemed to be playing cards saying, 'I'll ring them again.' He did not get on. At half-past eleven he rang again, and at once received a faint 'hello.' That was enough for him. 'Oh, Clara, please forgive me. It's Harry speaking,' he exclaimed in a soft, repentant voice. But there was a strange shuffling of papers at the other end, and he paused.

'I suppose you know you are speaking to Paddington Station,' said a deep bass voice.

Pillguard rattled the instrument impatiently and recalled the operator, and was met by the quiet patience of the exchange, a patience which may be indefinitely extended but always ends in 'No reply.'

The inspector made a note of the exact time, and decided to report the matter next day. It was one of

his set habits. His department was efficient; he saw no reason why other departments such as the telephone service should not be as efficient.

Next day the exchange rang up Miss Lehman. 'Was there anyone to answer the telephone at your premises at eleven-thirty last night?' someone asked.

'Yes, I was here,' said Clara promptly.

'Thank you.'

Chapter Thirteen

CLARA obtained an engagement to dance at the Stage Restaurant in December. She had danced there some months previously, and could have filled the bill alone, but owing to her contract with Goodge she was obliged to mention her new partner. So both were engaged, and at a higher fee, but that had to be split, and Jacques took his commission as well. Clara made much less out of it than before. Still, Sawyer was putting a thousand pounds into the venture of Jacques' Band, and it was going to give its first show on the night of Boxing Day. Hardinge had proved successful. Sawyer was financing the *Butterfly Princess*, which would be produced as a children's show at the Arena. He had not installed the revolving stage, as Iredale had asked more than he was prepared to give. But he was taken with the idea of providing a part for Clara.

It fell out much as Stanley Goodge had planned. He had used Clara as a bait to interest Josiah Sawyer, and he had landed the big fish. It was not clear why he needed so much as a thousand pounds for the accoutrement of his band. Instruments and uniforms would not cost all that. But the band thereupon became

Jacques Band, Ltd., and a handsomely-printed pamphlet was issued with numerous photographs of himself and Clara and the band. Rehearsals now took up a great deal of Clara's time. She was the butterfly of the piece, clad in pale-blue tights, and gilded wings, and had a great deal more to do than dance with the Prince. She rehearsed these dances with Jacques at the studio in Ham Yard, but had also to put in hours every day on the draughty stage of the Arena.

The misunderstanding with Pillguard was not cleared up. She had not time to see him, and he in his disconcerting way had retired into his shell. She waited for him to telephone or write or come and see her, but none of those things happened. Mr. Sawyer became more pressing in his attentions, but the more she saw of him the more she thought of Pillguard. Mr. Sawyer surveyed her figure when he first saw her in the pale-blue tights, and was evidently fascinated. He was extraordinarily deficient in speech, but his eyes spoke an increased interest. The plea that rich men of his type liked to be seen in the company of a beautiful lady of doubtful morals did not seem entirely adequate. Clara did not object to her morals being thought doubtful. That in its way was an asset. And she did not object to providing a feminine background for Sawyer if it should prove profitable, and if that was all it meant. She had rashly agreed to take the flat in Palace Arcade from the first of January at the same rent as she was paying at Dial Street. It was true that that flat had remained untenanted for some time, and was lying idle

on Mr. Sawyer's hands, but it was obvious that it could be let at a much higher rental. She was distinctly under an obligation to her landlord. That seemed to be all right. He wished to pay for the pleasure of her company at the theatre and the dance, and why not? It was a more delicate way of paying than handing her five-pound notes. But if he began to be in love he had bought favours from her, and these favours she knew she would be unwilling to bestow.

An invitation which Clara received early in December provoked her curiosity: 'Mr. and Mrs. Josiah Sawyer request the pleasure of your company on Thursday, the 10th inst. (4-6.30).' If she went she would see Mrs. Sawyer for the first time. If a man has a relationship into which his wife does not enter, it is generally wise to keep her resolutely out of it. The most self-effacing of wives have a way of putting a spoke in the wheel. But Clara decided to go because knowing the wife seemed to guarantee the harmlessness of her connection with the husband.

Jacques was invited, and also several of the cast of the *Butterfly Princess*, and Hardinge and Duggan and even Celestine. Evidently a large gathering was intended. She drove Mr. Goodge to the house in Sussex Gardens, and he permitted himself to be facetious about the personality of their hostess. Clara had incautiously asked him what sort of a lady she was. According to him Mrs. Sawyer was a frump. She believed in reincarnation and spiritualism. She had believed in the Angels of Mons. She believed that

Annie Besant had found a new Christ in India. She had entertained and worshipped Conan Doyle. She was one of the immense audience of Sir Oliver Lodge. She even believed that her husband was 'psychic.'

'That is because Sawyer is a strong, silent man,' explained Goodge. 'He says so little she has to guess all the time what he is thinking and doing. You'll find she has guessed about you all right.'

'There's not much to guess,' replied Clara, flushing lightly.

Stanley Goodge smiled, and was silent, as if nursing some jest which he was unwilling to express. Clara was annoyed because if she had encouraged Sawyer it was mainly on his advice, to help the business. Now she was uneasily aware that he believed she was playing for her own hand. Or was Jacques jealous of the larger part which was being given her in the show?

'I've played my part. We've got a thousand pounds out of him for the band, and he has put up the money for the show. Now I'm quite free to drop him, if I like,' said she.

'Not on your life. You're not such a fool as all that,' replied Goodge.

The party was in full swing when they arrived. The whole house was given over to it, or so it appeared.

There was no formal announcement of guests. Clara and Stanley Goodge went upstairs to the cocktail bar, and Mr. Sawyer, who had been watching for her arrival, saw her at once, and came over to her, bearing in his hands two handsome crystal glasses filled to the brim

with a yellow frothing bacardi. Goodge took his and went away with it to talk to someone else. Sawyer led Clara to his friend Larry Porlock, who could make up for his deficiency in the matter of talk. Sawyer had a curious way of coming up to one as if bursting with some topic of conversation, and then changing his mind and saying nothing after all. He could not help it; he had little to say. But if he had had anything new to communicate to Clara, the cocktail-party was not the place to say it. Porlock was a lively middle-aged novelist who had just been divorced for the second time and was proud of it. A few drinks had unloosed his tongue, and he accepted Clara from Sawyer as if right away he intended to make her his third wife. At least his opening remark, 'You ought to be married, my dear,' might have suggested it. 'Why?' asked Clara. 'Girls ought to marry as young as they can,' said he. 'Marry young and marry often is my motto.'

Mr. Sawyer looked down on him while he spoke with a sort of wall-eyed respect, as if he were about to interpolate a very weighty remark. Porlock looked closely at Clara and winked. 'Not that Josey Sawyer knows anything about it,' said he. 'He's the model husband. He and his wife go hand in hand together through the years.'

'I've heard about you,' said Clara. 'I read of your divorce.'

'Ah, there's Aubrey Nicholls. He and I are double alimony men. I want to start a club composed only of

men who pay alimony to two women. What do you think of that?'

But Clara's chief impression when she returned home was unpleasant. She sensed Porlock's immense contempt for women. For him, women could be bought, played with, discarded, put on a pay-roll as sexual pensioners. She was aware of the degrading role as if she herself were playing in it. She gave Sawyer her company and he paid for it. In exchange for a dinner at the Berkeley she would give a sentimental old man her smiles and wear a certain dress to please him. Clara was proud of her independence, of the fact that she earned her living, and at times fancied herself on an equal footing with men. She did not despise Emily, who stayed at home and let her old father support her, but she had felt in a way superior. Nevertheless there were times when she knew she deceived herself, and that she was little more than a parasite on rich men. For her dancing was a dancing to please men. It was not art. It was not the dancing of Lopokhova or Karsavina. Under the tutorship of Jacques it had become frankly more sexual. She wore less; she interpreted less. She danced for the 'tired business man,' gave him vitality, made him believe he was virile, made him order more drink and throw money about to make believe he was great. And this silent cadaverous Sawyer in frock-coat and shiny topper, staring at the contour of her body in tricot, what exactly did he want from her in the long run? Fortunately, no one at the party seemed to link her intimately with Sawyer, but she could see what had

been running through Jacques' mind. If she played her cards well she could easily lure the rich man away from his middle-aged wife. His wife might divorce him, and she could then marry him and spend his money for him. She had an icy sensation as if someone had placed a cold hand down her back.

She reverted to Harry Pillguard's letter, and his calm assumption that she might be willing to give up her dancing and the friends she had made through her profession and accept the humdrum domesticity of keeping house for him and being loved by him. She was still annoyed by that letter. Men did not as a rule ask her to give up things. They always expected her to be more self-indulgent than she really was. But this inspector was going to be an exception. He would decide what she was going to wear and what friends she might have. Judging from the statement of income that he had sent her he was a man who was always going to keep accounts and would put her on a very meagre dress allowance if he had the chance. Then when he had her plain, he would think she was less good-looking and would tire of her and begin to bully. She had thought of him with affection; yes, she was fond of him and wanted to have him around. But she had come near falling into a trap.

She began to dress to go to her engagement to dance with Jacques at the Stage. Her head swam a little after Mr. Sawyer's cocktails, which had been more potent than appeared at the time. She would rather have had an idle evening and gone to bed early, but

business called her. She would not let Jacques down. He was her partner, not simply at the Stage Restaurant, but in the *Butterfly Princess*, and for a new successful life with his orchestra as background.

Jacques was a pleasant man to dance with. He had his professional code, which almost amounted to tact. He never said or did anything that might cause her to be out of humour. The dance itself might convey an impression of some indelicacy and certainly of sexual passion, but as far as Clara herself was concerned her partner was entirely inoffensive. His behaviour was as correct as his attire and his steps.

At the Stage Restaurant they did not take a table or mingle with the customers. Jacques came about ten minutes before the dance and they left almost immediately after, sometimes stopping to take a cup of coffee, but that was all. Jacques made the barest reference to the cocktail-party when he met Clara again. She was pleasantly relieved; she was afraid he might begin talking of herself and Mr. Sawyer again.

Next day she wrote to Pillguard:

Dear Harry, please forgive me for not answering your letter. You flattered me, indeed you did me a great honour by the proposal you made. I think it was premature on your part, you do not know me well enough. Had you known me better you would not have asked me to give up my profession. Even if I wished to do that it would be difficult. As you know, I am in partnership, and I could not break away

easily, even if I wished. It was a pity to spoil things just as we were beginning to know one another. Let us be friends. I am fond of you, perhaps more fond of you than I know, and if my rash words about your being selfish should cause you to forget me, I should miss you. We are all selfish, aren't we? Clara.

She thought that Henry Ellsworth Pillguard, upon receiving this letter, would come running back to her. But that was far from the case.

Chapter Fourteen

MR. PILLGUARD needed but little discouragement from Clara to become more than ever assiduous as a Civil Servant. There was more than enough official business to drive love cares to the realm of the subconscious. Owing to the economic crisis which had been reigning in England for two years the accounts sent in to the Income Tax Department had been becoming more and more complicated. There was evidence of a nation-wide adjustment of financial responsibilities. It was not merely that in answer to increased taxation men gave up their cars, went off tobacco, ceased drinking, moved into cheaper houses. Income itself, whether from home industry or foreign investment, had fallen off to such a degree that much more radical changes had to be made in the personal budget. Moneys were drawn from deposit. Larger overdrafts were sought at the banks. Banks were demanding increased collateral. House property or land was sold or mortgaged. The same was happening to war bonds and other gilt-edged stock. People were living on the proceeds of sales, which is to say they were living on capital. In a like manner, shopkeepers, unable to pay their rents, were advertising sale after

sale, trying to dispose of their goods at cost price or under. Rationalisation was in full swing. Businesses were being amalgamated. Branches were closing and their trade reverting in part to parent institutions. The problem Pillguard had most often to solve was: what was capital and what was income? Traders had become obstreperous in argument and plainly regarded the Inland Revenue as a predatory institution.

'The Budget has been balanced,' chorused the politicians. 'We will now balance Import and Export.'

'The Budget has been balanced. We are watching. We intend that it shall be balanced,' said Cabinet Ministers, more cautious than the noisy political crowd.

Did Pillguard feel sorry for the victims? Sometimes. His official wrath was reserved for an imaginary set of profiteers who were supposed to be doing well out of England's crisis. These hypothetical people were the big tax dodgers. He longed to have one of these big business men on the *tapis* and say to him in a quiet voice, 'Ah, you're not feeling so well now.' It was not so pleasant to have to deal with drowning men who were clinging desperately to wreckage in a heavy sea.

His thoughts of Miss Lehman were now curiously mixed up with a grudge he bore the two men who saw most of her, Stanley Goodge and Josiah Sawyer. At times he felt that if he could get back at these two 'gentlemen' he would have done a notable service for King and country. Actually it was a step he proposed

in the conquest of Clara. He had not given her up and he was artfully aware from her letter that she had not given him up either, and that there was hope of a kind. He had longed for her letter, but when he received it he made himself polite and cool, as if friendship meant wearing a mackintosh instead of an overcoat. He hardened himself against the stipulations she implied, that she must be free in the choice of her friends and to carry on her profession. She must give up those men 'for her own sake.' They would do her no good. As a friend he was as much opposed to them as he would have been as a fiancé. That seemed clear in his mind.

He again tackled the Sawyer accounts. Sawyer's business was not static. The secret of his success seemed to lie in the rapidity of the changes he made in his holdings of land and property. No one year was a guide as to his enterprises in the year following. The queries were numerous. Number 116a, Albemarle Crescent, figured in your accounts for last year: When exactly did you cease to be owner? Why are the proceeds minus the amount of the redeemed mortgage credited to capital account? At what price was the freehold originally bought? What amount represents your margin of profit on the deal? These matters were largely thrashed out by the Crown accountant in conversation with Sawyer's accountant. But the case dragged on because Sawyer's accountant could not answer every query on the spur of the moment, nor without consultation with Sawyer himself. Mr. Sawyer

was repeatedly asked to attend personally, but pleaded that he was busy, and the accountant said that his client could not reasonably be expected to sacrifice his valuable time in that way. The inspector was aware that Sawyer had time enough to spend on Miss Lehman, but of course he could not say so to the accountant.

Secret information showed that he had purchased property in Paris, but the transactions did not properly fall within the past financial year. Inquiry failed to show that he had made previous deals which had been undisclosed. It was also discovered that in intelligent anticipation of Great Britain's going off the gold standard Sawyer had sold five thousand pounds sterling and that considerably over half a million francs stood to his credit in the Société Générale.

'I suppose your client has not previously embarked on theatrical business of any kind?' asked the inspector. 'It is common knowledge that he is backing a play which will shortly be produced at the Arena.'

The accountant looked a little surprised.

'I should not say it was common knowledge,' said he, 'but the Board of Inland Revenue is omniscient. As a matter of fact, I believe the firm thinks that it is as well to keep that dark.'

'But Mr. Sawyer is the firm. There is no one else. Why should he keep it dark?'

'He has his staff, who look after his interests. It is the first thing of the kind he has done, and I have heard the opinion expressed that he is likely to burn his

fingers. I should not be surprised if he drops several thousand pounds on it.'

'It is his first theatrical speculation? You are sure of that. I should like confirmation in writing.'

Mr. Pillguard called Miss Loob and dictated to her a memorandum to be filed with the Sawyer papers.

There was at least some gratification in holding what he believed to be a menace over the head of Josiah Sawyer. And he was convinced that that gentleman was 'for the high jump.' But he had less hold upon Stanley Goodge. Goodge was assessed in the 4th District of Paddington. He was convinced Paddington was rather slack. He knew Teddy Barger, who kept his oath of secrecy very well and laughed cynically when information was asked concerning any of his flock of taxpayers. Pillguard had had to find an official motive for his inquisitiveness. He notified Paddington 4 that Goodge had entered into partnership with Miss Lehman, of Dial Street, and asked for particulars of the assessment. Paddington sent the information required, but stated that there was no mention of any partnership in the return. That was enough for Pillguard. He took time off and went over to see Teddy Barger, who received him facetiously and suggested that they repair to a neighbouring teashop and play chess.

'I don't mind having a dart at you,' said Pillguard. 'But let us go into the Goodge figures first.'

Barger put in front of him Goodge's returns for the past five years, all in red ink in the most immaculate calligraphy, with beautiful pen strokes, signed by him

in a violent scrawl, but sponsored by a big tax-repayment association called 'The Income Tax Protective Society Ltd.,' run by a well-known peer. These returns were so efficiently and beautifully made out that they were commonly accepted without query. The Civil Service has a prejudice in favour of good handwriting.

Goodge's past, his adventures with his matrimonial bureau, etc., were all noted in the dossier. Information which seemed to go against their client had been freely vouchsafed by the Agency, but in handwriting which seemed to say '*Honi soit qui mal y pense.*'

Pillguard looked over the whole with beady eyes and seemed hypnotised.

'Seems O.K.,' said Pillguard sadly.

'I understand this partnership only dates from the current year,' said Barger. 'I don't see how it affects his return. You came along for a little exercise in timber-shifting. I know you. That's how you fellows at St. Giles help the groaning Chancellor of the Exchequer.'

'Take it into the notes for next year,' replied Pillguard. 'You never know when you are going to catch a gentleman of this kind.'

'I shan't lie awake tonight thinking of that,' said Barger. 'But come along. I haven't played you for months. I wish you'd come along more often. Make a habit of it.'

'You get the idea,' replied Pillguard. 'If you get any further information about this gent come along

to St. Giles with it. You owe me a call. I'll get Iredale and Starman and we'll have a foursome.'

Next day when Pillguard went to the office he was surprised to find that Vincey, his chief, was there. Vincey was Chief Inspector of Taxes for St. Giles. He was a sickly man who put in little time on official business. His signature on a rubber stamp did most of his work. He did not interfere with his staff, being aware that they did their work efficiently. But he had telephoned Pillguard the afternoon before, and affected astonishment at his absence from the office.

Pillguard explained that he had been to Paddington on official business.

'A matter of a pound or so, I suppose,' said Vincey grumpily. 'You could have written. We shall have to give up the purist theory that we give as much time to adjusting a matter of twopence halfpenny as we do in raking in a few thousand for the revenue. I have received an urgent and confidential message from the Board. In plain language it means "Put on the screw."''

There was a general meeting of inspectors that forenoon, and Vincey addressed them.

A total of the gross assessments of each district was to be made and sent forthwith to the Board. 'That being so, you must tackle the outstanding cases in a heroic spirit and assess. Where the taxpayer is causing trouble, close the correspondence, assess him, and let him contest it afterwards if he feels competent. In half these doubtful cases the taxpayer dare not come into court. At the least publicity his trade competitors come

forward and denounce him. The main point is this, that when the Board has got all the figures in, it will pick out the districts with the smallest returns and ask for an explanation.'

The inspectors therefore had to forgive their enemies in a hurry by the mode of assessing them at a higher amount. In effect that did not mean much, because as the Scottish saying puts it: you cannot steal a Highlander's trousers. During the ensuing week Pillguard and the helpful Miss Loob piled up a handsome amount of paper profit for His Majesty's Exchequer. But he did not deal out of hand with the case of Josiah Sawyer. He still believed he would have that gentleman on the carpet.

Chapter Fifteen

CLARA, after writing Pillguard, wanted an answer more than she had wanted to write. Each post, she scanned the handwriting of her correspondence for his. And whenever the telephone bell rang she thought it might be Harry calling her. She grudged the time she was away from the flat, believing that he might telephone in her absence. One evening she had a premonition that he would call her, and refused to have dinner with Sawyer. She dressed to go to the Stage to dance with Jacques, but waited till the last possible moment at Dial Street. But there was nothing. She looked at her face in the mirror and smiled pathetically, singing to herself the words of a bygone popular song: 'All alone at the telephone, all alone, feeling blue.'

The longer he kept her waiting the more she wished she had written him more warmly. It was a revelation to herself. She had not felt dependent on him till she began to watch the post for his reply. There were moments when, if he had come personally to Dial Street to give his answer she might have been ready to surrender without conditions.

When at last, one morning, while she was still abed,

the letter was brought up by the charwoman, she tore open the envelope feverishly. Lying on her side in her orange silk pyjamas, she held the letter close to her face, almost against her nose, and read it with childish pleasure. And when she had read the letter twice she placed it under her pillow, stretched herself in the warm hollow of her mattress and slipped into a happy reverie.

It was as if she had received a letter full of those caressing words which a woman in love so enjoys. Pillguard had made her happier at this moment than he had done at any time before, even when his mouth with its ravening black moustache had kissed her.

But why? Clara dressed herself in happy mood, and placed the open letter on her table, and read it again as she pulled up her silk stockings and fastened the metal clips that held them to her girdle.

This letter was not in dire officialese, and did not hold the dreadful phrase, the *status quo ante*.

Dear Clara [it ran], I beg to acknowledge your letter of the 5th instant, and tender my humble thanks for same. I think you gave me your answer in the taxi when you told me I was selfish. I have reflected a long while on that, and have come to the conclusion that you were right. I am selfish. But I also think that within limitations a man has a right to be selfish. That is my position, but if, notwithstanding that, you think that we can still be friends, I am ready to be a friend in the best sense of the

word. I hope you will forgive any shortcomings in that direction. It may still be part of friendship to try and protect you if I see you falling into the hands of crooks, but I promise not to interfere without reason. I have left your letter some days unanswered, and I apologise. It required some thought on my part to answer. But if you are of the same mind will you have lunch with me on Friday at one p.m. at the Lyons' at 180, New Oxford Street? This letter needs no reply. I shall be there in any case. Yours sincerely, Henry Ellsworth Pillguard.

An invitation to lunch at Lyons'! No gallant gentleman had ever asked her to a cream-and-gold establishment before. That was a decided novelty. Clara laughed indulgently. Harry's restrained and polite reply filled her with childish glee. She was only sorry that it was Thursday, and that she must wait a whole day for the rendezvous.

But she was in high spirits that day, and again next morning at the rehearsals of the *Butterfly Princess*, and the producer, who would never have chosen her for the part, was aware of an improvement. The Princess must be gay all the time if she was going to amuse the children of Boxing Night. Jacques as the melancholy son of a Sultan, despising the virgins of his country, was good enough, as most of the courtiers, including the Grand Vizier himself, were drawn from his jazz band, and gave him plenty of opportunity for dancing and fooling. Pat and Maureen, no longer Irish twins,

but a couple of nigger dwarfs with feather girdles, were a useful feature in the show, little mischief-makers who always came on the scene in romantic or tragical moments. Duggan had refused to produce the show, because, although there was money in it for him, he did not wish to be associated with a failure. He got Werbright the job and promised to give advice occasionally. He decided to 'nurse' Sawyer for a further enterprise which would give him, Duggan, more scope. Werbright was in reality his apprentice in producing, young and ambitious and optimistic. He was greatly encouraged when, about the middle of December, Duggan spent some hours at the theatre, and gave it as his opinion that the *Butterfly Princess* might yet make a big hit. 'No one can tell with this sort of thing,' said he. 'I know at least one piece that has established itself firmly and comes on regularly year after year, and it is much worse than this.'

Werbright told Jacques and Jacques told Clara. That was on the Friday, and she went to meet Pillguard at Lyons' with the assurance of success.

Pillguard, with well-furled umbrella and the measured equal stride of a man controlled by routine, arrived punctually at one o'clock, and was obliged to verify the flocking customers of the tea-shop in its three rooms before he saw Clara. He had returned to the first room and she stood in the doorway looking for him. It was with some difficulty and after waiting awkwardly and silently for some minutes, before they found a table where they could sit together.

'I'll have a chicken patty, a cup of coffee, stewed cherries and cream,' said Pillguard quickly. 'What'll you have?'

'The same for me,' said Clara.

'That's my regular lunch,' said the inspector almost apologetically.

Clara in her smart hat and well-cut Parisian coat, colour of red granite, did not belong to the class of girl who used the teashop, and she searched in vain for a table napkin. Miss Loob would have been much more at home. Her face still held her *couleur de rose* from the morning's rehearsal, giving her countenance with its exuberant brown hair an exotic appearance as of an artificial flower.

'Not much for a man,' said she.

'I find I work better on a light lunch,' said Pillguard. 'And then of course economy. When one has to pay sixty pounds a year income tax one must tighten one's belt in the middle of the day. It works out at one shilling and twopence, seven shillings a week, say eighteen pounds a year.'

'I was never good at figures,' said Clara. 'But that means the Government takes three or four lunches at your expense every day of your life. Three eighteens are fifty-four; aren't they? I wonder you are so keen on the income tax.'

'Yes,' said the inspector, 'if one worked out the gross income-tax yield of the country in free meals, it would seem phenomenal. Your friend Sawyer alone pays enough to feed a street in the slums.'

'How fine!' exclaimed Clara. 'Why don't they use it that way?'

'They are still paying for the guns and the shells of the old war. Patriotic gentlemen advanced the money for the shells, and you and I and all of us go on paying for them.'

'But you try and take all you can from Mr. Sawyer?'

'Why? Has he told you?' asked the inspector sharply.

Clara laughed and inquired: 'Why are you always so suspicious, Harry? I never knew a man before who was so suspicious. If you knew Mr. Sawyer, you would know that his motto is, silence is golden. He never says a word too much. And of course he does not discuss his private affairs with me. He is only my employer, and my landlord.'

'Landlord?'

'Ah, you do not know. I am moving from Dial Street at the end of the quarter.'

Pillguard gulped down his stewed fruit, and did not raise his eyes from his plate. He was angry again. But he was resolutely silent. He had resigned the right to criticise her personal doings. But his chagrin was written on his face, as if he had found salt in his cream.

'Well?' asked Clara.

'Nothing. I have not the right to offer an opinion, but I liked you in Dial Street. It will always have associations for me.'

A hurrying waitress with pencil to her lip came up. 'One bill for two,' said Pillguard promptly, although

Clara at once opened her bag to find the money to pay her share. Pillguard waved his hand deprecatingly, and Clara, instead of finding money, brought out a small package in tissue paper and handed it to him. The two young clerks sitting at the table eating rissoles stared at the package, which Pillguard opened warily, as if expecting something live to flutter out. It did not take a moment.

‘You should not have done that,’ said the inspector, staring at a rich brown tie.

Clara blushed, and they got up at once from the table.

‘Come to the flat,’ said she, ‘and put it on. I want to see if it suits you.’

Clara had left her car in a side street, and they drove together to Dial Street, Pillguard being in an extraordinary good humour.

‘You put on the tie while I make some coffee,’ said Clara when they had reached her rooms.

He put aside the drab toneless tie which went so well with his dark, navy blue suit, and methodically tied the new one in its place, staring at himself in the brilliant mirror. It was Clara’s colour, not his, but he was fascinated by it. Not for a moment did it occur to him that it did not suit him. Clara came in with two cups of black coffee which she had made hot, and was delighted. She saw that it did not quite suit him, but she longed for a spot of colour. ‘You’ll wear it,’ she said, ‘won’t you?’

‘Every day,’ replied Pillguard with conviction.

'A tie is a symbol of friendship,' invented Clara, 'just as a ring means love.'

'That's fine. We are friends. But we must make an exchange,' said he. 'You must accept something from me. I'll think about it. I cannot give you a tie. You don't wear them.'

After coffee, he insisted on her coming with him as far as the office, and he stopped the car outside a jewellers. Pillguard knew what he wanted. He had seen it there in the window, and once before thought of buying it for Clara. It was a little platinum ring bearing one lustrous agate. Clara did not refuse to have it from him, though she had said that a ring meant love.

She kissed it on her finger, as she said good-bye, and Pillguard bounded up the office stairs like a schoolboy. When he got to his desk he began to under-assess busily. 'Why should the miserable taxpayer go on paying for ever for the war?' he said to himself. 'Let's cut some of these exaggerated demands!'

Mr. Vincey came in to ask him a question, stared at his brown tie like an owl at a lamp, but made no remark. Miss Loob came in to receive dictation, and stared at the tie also.

'What a beautiful tie!' she exclaimed. 'You must have bought it in the lunch-hour. You did not have it on this morning.'

'Yes,' said the inspector. 'Winter is here. I thought a little bit of colour might be an improvement. We beg to state that having reviewed all the circumstances

of the case we are disposed to accept the amended figures as shown on the annexed statement. Please copy in duplicate. Which please file for future reference in making our returns. You will receive assessment in due course. Next! Ah, yes, say that it will not be necessary for the taxpayer to call at the office. Assessment will be made on the basis of the figures submitted.'

Chapter Sixteen

MR. SAWYER was generous. He put a box at Clara's disposal for Boxing Night, which really meant that he paid into the box office the equivalent amount. For himself and his wife he took seats in the dress circle. It had leaked out that he was financing the show, and a reporter, after witnessing the dress rehearsal, wanted to announce him to the world as a new Cochran. But Sawyer was not flattered. 'You can say in your paper that it is my Christmas gift to London,' said he. 'My first and last venture of the kind.'

Clara invited her father and Emily and Mr. Pillguard to share her box, and they were delighted. They would have come in any case, but could not have afforded to take a box. Dr. Smith had mentioned the upper circle as a bit of a luxury, and Pillguard had hinted that he might try and get a stall free through Iredale.

The theatre was filled, the lowered lights were rose-tinted. There was a whispering and a rustling of children and programmes and a fumbling in the cut-paper stuffing of many chocolate boxes. And suddenly there was a burst of drums from the jazz band behind the curtain; the lights went up; the curtain rose and

the scene was Africa, with palms and sand and monkeys in the palms and a black-faced musician behind every tree. On came the procession of the Sultan with his bare-thighed wives all jingling with hanging coins, and the Grand Vizier a tall savage with long grey beard, and the varlets of the kitchen brandishing pots and pans, and the melancholy Prince in a tiger skin, and virgins carrying his shield and his spear, then the court burlesques, and last a tourist from Balham with his flapper wife in sun helmets, but bound and closely guarded. From behind the palm trees the Havana Four and the Savannah Six broke loose in strident music from horns and saxophones. The Sultan found a throne on a hummock of sand and while the varlets set up their camp kitchen and prepared to cook the tourists, Pat and Maureen, the nigger dwarfs, holding hands and making funny noises, danced before the court.

The theatre enjoyed this. The children liked the dwarfs as much as they liked the monkeys in the trees. The funny antics and cross-talk of the tourist from Balham then followed and amused the grown-ups, for they were a couple of clever comedians from the music-halls, and used every quip of their repertoire in begging for their lives. The Sultan, after consulting with the Vizier, promised cynically to spare them if they could make the Prince smile, knowing that his melancholy son had not smiled for years. This was the cue for Jacques to dance the most lugubrious blues which his saxophonists could play, so that the kitchen varlets stopped in their work and sobbed, and the wives of

the Sultan cried into buckets, which were carried away full of tears. The Balham couple then told a fanciful story of their travels, facing simmering pots which were waiting to receive them, each episode funnier or more fantastic than the last. The Prince remained unmoved, and in desperation the flapper wife, remembering a fairy-tale of childhood, invented the butterfly kingdom, and caught the interest of the Prince at last. The Grand Vizier disbelieved the tale; the Sultan disbelieved the tale; the wives said they were very hungry and disbelieved the tale. And the Prince did not smile, but he was interested.

The rather bored critics in the theatre, somnolently digesting their Christmas pudding, did not think the play would go, but there was tremendous applause after the first scene, and following the applause one great infectious laugh caused by a gentleman in the stalls who, wearing a long false nose and a paper hat, insisted on standing up and bowing acknowledgment to all the circles. He had nothing to do with the show, and two young nephews clung at his coat tails and tried to pull him back into his seat. The whole noisy theatre was in a good humour.

Dr. Smith and Emily and Mr. Pillguard were a little disappointed that Clara had not yet appeared, and they reserved their enthusiasm for the second act. Only Emily gave her whole-hearted approval and clapped boisterously so that she attracted the attention of Mr. Sawyer's opera-glasses directed upon the occupants of Clara's box.

'This will be a great night for my daughter if she has a success,' said Dr. Smith. 'The beginning of a new career. She has a whole-page photograph in the *Sketch* next week. It would mean that she had arrived. I confidently expect that she will have a brilliant stage career.'

'The second act will have to be better if it's going to catch on,' said Pillguard. 'I expect Clara will pull it off, but I confess I feel nervous.'

The lights went down, and the audience was whisked away to the Court of the Butterflies, where the beautiful Clara was being pursued by a man with a big net. Pillguard could hardly believe his ears when he heard this gentleman referred to as the income-tax collector. For a moment he suspected that lines at his expense had been worked into the play. In a huge case with pins transfixed were a dozen butterfly girls with wings outspread. The lepidopterist was made sinister by purple spectacles, and he step-danced and sang and made passes in the air at dancers and shadows. Clara appeared guarded by two winged maids, and the collector dashed off-stage after one of the maids, while the Butterfly Princess danced her first dance. He reappeared with a gigantic setting board and a struggling butterfly girl.

The scene was an oasis in the desert, a garden about a rock fountain and the flowers, which were as big as human beings, swayed to and fro to protect the butterflies from the collector. The jazz band, entirely hidden from view, played all the while, and soon came one of

the hits of the show, the dance of the butterfly and the butterfly collector, which was rapturously applauded from Box A, Emily leaning out and hurrahing. The dancers were recalled and danced it again.

The next scene was a short one. It showed the Sultan and his court struggling through the sand, led by the tourists from Balham, towards the Butterfly Kingdom, which no one believed to exist. This was funny, and the audience laughed a great deal. Of course, the tourists, with the band of handsome savages, arrived in the nick of time, just when Clara was being put on the setting board. The Prince dashed in and rescued her, and the unfortunate collector was bound and placed at the disposal of the kitchen varlets. Jacques and Clara danced their big dance, and brought down the house and had to dance again. Then the Vizier made his comic inspection of the Prince's mouth to discover a smile, and made a speech to the Sultan's wives, who voted unanimously that he had smiled.

The curtain went down in a joyous hubbub. Jacques and Clara and the whole cast reappeared in answer to the applause, and then Clara and Jacques by themselves. A little girl bedecked with roses mounted the stage and presented Clara with a lovely bouquet which she clasped to her pale-blue body as she retired behind the curtain.

Dr. Smith, Pillguard and Emily clapped as long as anybody else would in the theatre, and Emily gave the last clap.

'A great success,' sighed the doctor, his face flushed with excitement.

'Mr. Stanley Goodge is more of a man than I thought,' said Pillguard.

'I only wish her poor dear mother were alive to see her,' said the doctor. 'How happy this would have made her.'

'She has pulled it off. She has great talent,' said Pillguard, who was so excited he stood up and began to pace to and fro in the box.

Then there was a surprise. The door of the box opened quietly and the Butterfly Princess herself stood in the doorway. Pillguard took both her hands in his and gazed into her eyes. The doctor stood up devoutly as if the Queen had entered. Clara would not come forward lest the audience should see her. 'Was it good?' she asked.

'Wonderful,' said the doctor. 'Topping,' said Emily. 'You had a great success,' said Pillguard.

She carried some roses from her bouquet, and gave them each a flower. 'And Jacques had a success, too,' said she.

'You'll be pleased to hear we have decided to give that gentleman a clean bill of health,' said the inspector sombrely. 'I suppose he put in that bit about the income tax.'

'There's more to come,' said Clara laughing. 'He did not put it in. It was all in the book.'

Clara could not stay. She was wanted off-stage. Not only that, but she knew that Mr. Sawyer was waiting

to congratulate her. He had sent her those lovely flowers. She must not disappoint him.

The last act was the wedding. The collector was being cooked in several pots, and his funny head with its blue spectacles kept bobbing up from one of the pots and making absurd remarks. The Sultan's hungry wives demanded a foretaste of the soup, and pronounced it rich. Who would have thought that an income-tax collector would make such good soup! The kitchen varlets added seasoning from a bin marked Schedule D. The twins danced their pepper-and-salt dance. The jazz band was now massed as part of the court and cut curious antics, each musician doing a little dance of his own. Clara and Jacques danced their wedding dance, the Prince laughing all the while and behaving in the absurdest fashion. The tourists danced a *pas de deux* in comic style.

The banquet was a feast of fun, and the Sultan made an announcement to his subjects that as from the fifth of April next, there would be a complete remission of income tax for a whole year.

Everyone enjoyed eating the collector except the English tourists, who had a large plate of bacon and eggs instead. They explained that they could not partake of the main dish because in England the collector of taxes was considered a sacred animal.

This had its laugh from the grown-ups in the theatre, though Pillguard murmured: 'I wonder the Lord Chamberlain let that pass.' The curtain came down on the grand finale, to the band playing with double noise,

Clara and Jacques in the foreground, and the Sultan and all the rest with arms crossed as for 'Auld Lang Syne,' dancing and swaying behind them.

There was immediate, far-reaching and universal applause, mingled with shouting. The critics decided that the show was a success and dashed off to hand in their copy. The cast appeared severally and collectively, and were cheered untiringly. The children in the theatre enjoyed this excitement almost as much as the show itself. The tourists were great favourites, but Clara and Jacques won the most applause, and another large bouquet was handed up to the Butterfly Princess by a messenger of Mr. Josiah Sawyer. The author, a young Scotsman with tousled ginger hair, was called upon to make a speech.

Dr. Smith, Emily and Pillguard hurried behind the scenes to pay their compliments to Clara. The merest handshake, a soft pressure, was all they could command of the Princess in the crush. It was as if she continued to be a Princess after the play was done. They would have liked to take her away for a family celebration, but they knew she was invited to a party at Mr. Hardinge's house after the show, and that Mr. Sawyer would be there and Werbright and the author and the Sultan and the Grand Vizier and others of the cast. It was late. Dr. Smith excused himself. He and Emily would get on a bus and get back to Camden Town. Mr. Pillguard lingered on in the hope of seeing Clara once more, if only for a moment, before going home.

Mr. Sawyer put his head into her dressing-room and

remarked above the heads of her admirers that the car would be waiting for her in a quarter of an hour. This was a broad hint to the handshakers, who at once hustled to say a last word and leave her to dress. Everyone went out except a pertinacious journalist who was interviewing her for one of the illustrated dailies. Pillguard saw his opportunity. He came forward resolutely and addressed the journalist.

'I'm sorry,' said he, 'but Miss Lehman has an engagement and cannot spare more time.'

'Thanks. I think I've got all I want,' said the interviewer, and hurriedly went out. Pillguard carefully shut the door after him and then went swiftly up to Clara and took her in his arms, getting a large impress of powder on his evening clothes. Clara was embarrassed, and slightly resistant, but he did not let her go, being intent on risking friendship by a kiss. Suddenly there was a tap on the door. Pillguard had not locked it. It opened at once and the silk hat of Mr. Sawyer made its appearance. The inspector was too late. He had been seen embracing the Princess.

'I beg pardon. I thought you were alone,' said Sawyer, retreating.

'No, no, come in, it's quite all right,' cried Clara nervously. 'I want you to meet one of my best friends. You ought to meet. Mr. Sawyer, this is Mr. Henry Pillguard.'

Sawyer lingered, taking Pillguard's proffered hand listlessly, and looking him up and down as if he were some strange species. He had recognised one of the

occupants of Clara's box, but he did not at once make any rejoinder to Clara's introduction.

'It was a fine show. I think it ought to do well,' said Pillguard.

'Do you think so?' asked Sawyer without any answering enthusiasm. He seemed to be considering some other subject. Clara looked slightly alarmed, as if she thought the two men might begin to fight. But her doubts were quickly set at rest. Mr. Sawyer smiled suddenly as if he had thought of something that pleased him.

'We are having a little supper-party at a friend's house. Perhaps you would like to join us?' said he.

Clara and Pillguard were obviously delighted by the invitation. Mr. Sawyer nodded and withdrew.

Chapter Seventeen

IT WAS a gay, hilarious, successful party. Everyone believed that the show would have a long run, that there were profits for the manager and the author and ensured wages for the players for several months. The excitement of a successful first night was enhanced by the wine, and most of the company, including Clara, who kept standing up and making absurd speeches, glass in hand, seemed a little intoxicated.

Mr. Pillguard studied the expressionless face of Josiah Sawyer. He felt now that it was useless to demand his personal presence at his office. He could not have him 'on the carpet' after having become his guest. The difficulty of accommodating official and social relationship was not new to the inspector. He did not look like a crook, but then those big business men all had poker faces. Who would have thought, looking at the portraits of Whittaker Wright or Hatry, that there was anything doubtful in their financial dealings?

Concerning Stanley Goodge he felt much more at ease. He had a doubtful past, but in his business who had not? He had decided to give him a 'clean bill of health,' and he never went back on his decisions. Jacques had married Clara on the stage as the melan-

choly Prince, but no one could behave less possessively towards her than he did at the party, and he looked up with some surprise when Clara called on the guests to drink his health. He made a tactful speech, saying how much they all owed to the enterprise and friendly guidance of Mr. Sawyer, and finished by calling upon the company to drink the health of Mr. Josiah Sawyer. 'I've been married tonight. But I expect to be married nightly for a long period of time. There will be no time for me to get a divorce. Nevertheless, I ask you to drink with me the health of Josiah Sawyer, coupled with the name of the Butterfly Princess!'

Pillguard raised his glass and gazed attentively at the sparkling wine, but he did not drink. This was not in the best of taste on Mr. Goodge's part, he thought. But it was a gesture of non-interference. Although Clara was his partner he was clearly no claimant for her hand. It was a relief to him to feel that he had one and not two competitors. He sought to talk across the table to Jacques, but he did not succeed. Goodge, like the rest, was determined to ignore him. No one drank Mr. Pillguard's health. He did not belong. But on one occasion Clara nodded to him and sipped her wine, and that was a large consolation. Mr. Pillguard felt rich in the possession of a secret. Clara was nearer to him than to anybody else in the room.

The most awkward moment was the last. The party broke up about half-past one, and Mr. Pillguard vainly thought that he would have the privilege of escorting Clara home.

He went up to her to suggest this, but before he had time she put out a hand, smiled sweetly and said 'Good-bye.' He was taken aback. He did not leave at once, but saw Clara, deeply muffled, handed into Sawyer's Rolls-Royce, her two bouquets on her knees. Mr. Sawyer sat down beside her. There were cheers, and the chauffeur drove them away. Mr. Pillguard put on his hat and coat, and resolutely walked home.

Next day scene-shifters from the Arena came and moved Clara from Dial Street, arranging her furniture in the new flat as if they were handling sets for a theatre. They polished her rosewood piano, which had been her mother's, and it glittered in a white-walled room. A Persian rug, a present from Mr. Sawyer, looked up from the yellow parquet floor. Pink and yellow roses and fern leaves from the bouquets of the night before stood in large vases on the sideboard, on her dressing-table, and on the bedroom floor. The pictures on the walls were hung just as they should be. The divan and easy chairs looked like a lady and two plump daughters. They were new enough. Clara had bought them for Dial Street, but they looked much more proud of themselves in Buckingham Gate. Clara, as she moved about the new rooms in her morning dress, looked much richer than she had in Dial Street, as if she had come into money overnight. In truth she soon found that, although she was paying the same rent, it was going to cost a lot more to live up to the new premises than it had done in the shabby street.

Still, she was to receive thirty pounds a week, minus

Stanley Goodge's commission, from the Arena Theatre. That was more than she had ever earned before. She would not only be able to hire a smart maid, but would live altogether in better style, more like a lady. She did not feel in the least poor. Indeed, she had promised to give Emily a new dress, and made a date to go with her to the January sales.

But she was a little annoyed with Goodge when he did not pay her at the end of the first week. The actors and actresses not connected with him all got their salaries, but hers went into the lump sum which was paid over to Jacques in respect of his troupe. He said it had always been his custom to make monthly settlements, and his day for paying out was the twenty-fifth. So she would have to wait till the twenty-fifth of January. She was too proud to tell him that she could not wait till that date, and she did not tell Emily. Her expenses made a big hole in her savings.

Mr. Sawyer remained kind. He sent her a large box of candied fruit and a hamper of tangerines. She lunched daily at his table at the Savoy. He visited her flat, and seemed pleased with its appearance. The play drew a full house throughout the Christmas holidays, and during the first week in January. Certain guests at Sawyer's luncheon-parties told him that he was likely to make a pot of money. Clara had often heard the statement that the London theatre is ruined by rich provincials who come to town and start buying theatres and financing productions, but there was

evidently a swarm of middlemen on the look-out for these *parvenus*. The rumour had evidently gone round that Sawyer was one of the type, and that he yearned to burn his fingers in theatrical enterprise. But if Sawyer was flattered by the success of the *Butterfly Princess*, he did not show it. Duggan plied him carefully. He had another play in mind. It was after the style of Capek's insect play, and would follow on admirably after the *Butterfly Princess*. He said he could find a part for Clara in it, but was careful not to say the best part. He wanted Sawyer to take an option on it, and handed him the script. That seemed to mean that he had gone back on his resolve that the *Butterfly Princess* was his first and last venture of the kind. But then, he had a six-months lease of the Arena, and it was not likely that a Christmas show would last right on until the summer.

Pillguard became reconciled to Clara's taking the new flat from Sawyer. He was obliged to admit that it was infinitely more comfortable than the old flat in Dial Street. There were three rooms besides a modern bathroom. It was true there was no kitchen. Meals could be sent up as in his own flat, but that made the place more expensive. He bought her an electric stove so that she could make her morning coffee, and thus save a little money. His experienced eyes told him at once that it was going to cost her more to live there than in the old rooms. Clara and he did not quarrel now. He was true to the pact of friendship, and indeed found it easier to tolerate her life as an actress than as

a cabaret dancer. Routine loves routine; time-table can accommodate itself to time-table, and Clara lived almost as much of a routine life as the Butterfly Princess as he did as inspector of taxes.

These were happy days for Pillguard. The theatre performance interfered considerably with Sawyer's pleasure. He could not ask Clara out for the whole evening, nor could anybody else except on Sunday. Sawyer was a man who dined regularly at eight and liked to eat and drink leisurely. At the new year Stanley Goodge gave up his tenancy of the dance floor in Ham Yard. There were no more rehearsals. He seemed to be using his spare time on some other enterprise, which he kept secret from Clara. Now he did not seek her company, and they saw little of one another outside the actual theatre. One of his bandsmen could drive a car, and he used him as chauffeur. From the first of January onward Clara scarcely saw the car. Her father, who had paid half the tax for the first quarter, got no use of it. His only consolation was that he was saving money on garage and petrol. It seemed to him that after paying his January instalment of income tax that he would have had to give up the car anyway, and Clara promised to ask Jacques to buy it outright for twenty pounds. He was making a lot of money now, and it did not seem much to ask. He had satisfied himself that although the car was very old, it went and did not call for much money for repair. Pillguard on behalf of Clara called him up at Lancaster Gate Terrace, and found him quite ready to make the

deal. He promised to send Dr. Smith a cheque in the course of a week.

Every afternoon at five and sometimes a little before Pillguard left his office and took a bus to Buckingham Gate. When Clara was not likely to be in she telephoned him, but that was seldom.

‘Of course he puts number one first,’ said Pillguard. ‘But he’s straight. I’m satisfied on that point. I think you were unwise to sign an agreement with him, as it means he pockets a big slice of your earnings and does nothing for it.’

‘But I signed no agreement,’ said Clara. ‘It was a verbal arrangement.’

‘In that case you might apply to the management of the theatre to have your salary paid to you direct. I thought you had entered into a legal and binding partnership. But that’s good news. For your next engagement you can make your personal arrangements. You think Sawyer has another play up his sleeve, don’t you? He’s the big noise. You should take him into your confidence. I am sure he would be annoyed if he knew that you were having to wait for your money.’

‘He knows. I told him all about it. He offered me a cheque.’

‘And you refused? That was sporting of you.’

‘I cannot take money from him. He has done so much for me already. He seemed offended. He is a man who improves when you take a gift from him. There are men like that. Most of them are like that.’

On Old Year’s Night Clara dined for the first time

at Pillguard's flat. It was a great occasion for him, just slightly marred by the knowledge that Clara would join Sawyer's party at Claridge's after the theatre, and was to see the year out with him.

It was an early dinner, six-thirty, but it was a full one, roast turkey and chestnut stuffing, a bottle of choice Nuits and a Christmas pudding, all sent up on a tray from the kitchen below, but as good as bachelor flats can provide.

Clara was not allowed to see his bedroom. Pillguard was too fastidious for that, although he had seen hers. But she looked over the rest of his flat, and found it neat and tidy, too neat. But it seemed small compared with hers. He paid more rent than she did, and it hardly seemed fair.

'You'll have to give this up and come and share mine,' she said audaciously.

'Say when!' replied Pillguard in the same spirit.

'Here's to our friendship in the coming year!' cried Pillguard, lifting his glass. 'May we always be as happy as I am now!'

Clara put her glass against his. 'Harry, I drink to your happiness!' said she.

When the pudding was brought in and the waiter had retired, Pillguard poured brandy on it and then switched off the electric light. They were in the dark for a moment while he put a box of matches in Clara's hands. She struck a light, and he saw the face of the Butterfly Princess in the pale illumination. Then she lighted the brandy and the spirit with a blue flame

laved the surface of the brown pudding and mounted as Pillguard, spoon in hand, poured on more brandy.

He had got up from his seat and stood beside her at the table, and as the blue flame expired he allowed his left hand to pass across her lips and she kissed it.

'I kiss the hand that feeds me,' said she self-consciously when he had turned on the lights once more.

'You have become very sweet to me,' she added gently, looking straight into his eyes, when he was again seated in his chair. 'And you are a little different since I met you first, aren't you?' she asked.

'Yes, you should see me at the office,' said the inspector. 'I'm a changed man. I'm not the Scrooge I was, and I owe it all to you.'

'I did not find you a Scrooge when I came to present my accounts. You were very nice to me.'

'Yes, but after you someone came and called me a Scrooge, and it stuck. I've just read Dickens' *Christmas Carol* to find out what sort of a man he was, and I found he was terribly like me.'

'What a shame. But you are not. You are a knight-errant; you told me so yourself.'

'Well, I'm not going to be a Scrooge any more. I've made my mind up to that. One good resolution for the coming year.'

Chapter Eighteen

IN THE second week in January there was a falling off in the box-office receipts of the Arena. On Monday morning, the 25th, there appeared in the Press advertisement the baleful addition—‘Last week.’

This was a sore blow to Clara, as she saw no immediate prospect of engagement for another play. Mr. Sawyer calmly announced that he had disposed of the remainder of the lease to Mr. Iredale, who was transferring one of his productions there on the first of February. ‘I suppose you know that,’ said he, handing Duggan back the script of his insect play. For the first time Sawyer was less amiable towards Clara, as if for the moment she were embarrassing. His manner implied, ‘Don’t ask me to do anything for you. I have lost too much money already.’ Clara was far from appealing to him for help. If she got the hundred pounds due to her from Jacques and the balance at the end of the week, she could carry on as before. The show had not damaged her. On the contrary, it had given her excellent advertisement, and it ought to make it easier for her to obtain profitable engagements.

And it was Jacques’ pay day. After the show, as if anticipating her coming question about money, Jacques

said: 'I've decided to pay out altogether on Saturday, when the show ends. I think that will be better than paying what is due to date and then a dribblet next month.'

'But I'm in need of the money,' said Clara firmly.

'Oh, if you're in need of it I'll see you have a cheque tomorrow,' said Goodge, smiling.

But next evening Goodge had forgotten it, and excused himself.

'And the cheque to my father for the car, you've forgotten that also?' exclaimed Clara.

'Yes, I've been so busy. I foresaw this rotten *Butterfly Princess* wouldn't last long, and I've been in correspondence about something else, something much better. I'll let you know about it. We shall have to begin rehearsing almost at once.'

Clara did not know whether to believe him or not, whether to rejoice in the prospect of dancing with him at the music-halls, or to feel that that was not her line. His behaviour on the stage, and the attitude of the Havana Four and the Savannah Six towards herself, did not make her sure that the combination was going to prove a good one.

On the Wednesday night there was still no cheque and still more excuses. Clara said that she would take the matter to Mr. Sawyer. Jacques grimaced.

'He has little interest in the show now,' said he. 'But he has a lot of interest in you. I put you on to a good thing, and now you are ungrateful.'

'How?'

'Why,' said Goodge, 'if you got nothing out of the show you would still have got the prize. You get the old man. He's sweet on you. You go to him, give him a sob-story. I'll pay you all right at the end of the week, but you can make me out as a crook to him. I don't mind. I've played your game all the while.'

Stanley Goodge, *alias* Grafton, received a great surprise. Clara reached out and gave him a resounding box on the ear. He almost fell on the floor. Clara turned about and left him without a word.

Jacques bore no malice. Perhaps it was not the first time he had had a box on the ear from a lady. On the Thursday night he was quite meek in his demeanour. He met her before the performance, cheque in hand.

'I apologise for yesterday. I went too far,' said he, waving the cheque. Clara was still angry and she was silent. Only the sight of the cheque prevented her from going at once to her dressing-room. But that was her cheque. She had earned it. It was no favour from Jacques. And she needed it.

'But this is only for fifty pounds,' she said, looking at the cheque.

'I've made it out for a round figure,' said Goodge. 'I have not had time to go into the figures, commission and all that, but you'll receive a full statement and cheque for the balance early next week.'

Clara folded the cheque and put it in her bag.

'One minute,' said Jacques. 'We may as well be business-like. Have you a pen? No, here's mine. Just sign the receipt; it is stamped.'

He handed her a wisp of paper. 'Sign over the stamps; it's better,' said he hurriedly.

Hardly had she signed the receipt, which was headed, 'Butterfly Princess: period of engagement, December 26th-January 30th,' than he took it from her and waved it in the air to dry it.

'Now I hope we can be friends as before,' said Jacques with a deprecating smile. 'After all, we have to play together for four more performances.'

Clara forced a smile, and that was enough for the melancholy Prince, who went off to his dressing-room in the best of spirits.

Out of the fifty pounds Clara sent twenty to her father, saying that she had at last got the purchase money out of her partner. Dr. Smith was naturally pleased, and impulsively sent Mr. Stanley Goodge a receipt by return of post. But he did not tell Clara he had done so. He waited until the Sunday, when she was coming to tea, to thank her. Clara told Pillguard that she had received fifty pounds on account of her salary. 'There, I told you so. The man is all right. If he were going to do you he would do you for the whole amount.' Clara did not tell Pillguard of the insinuation Goodge had made about her relationship with Sawyer, or he might have been less ready to reassure her.

'You will be absolutely free on Monday night. Let us have dinner together, and then go and see a play from the other side of the footlights!'

'If I get my cheque for the balance from Mr. Goodge,

let me take you out,' said Clara. 'Let's celebrate! For I'm breaking my partnership with him from the moment the curtain goes down on Saturday night.'

'You are?' exclaimed Pillguard. 'Cheers! You're going back to be a one-man show; then I can accompany you as I did to Celestine's. I could not do that as long as you had a partner.'

'If only I could get something to go on with,' said Clara sadly. 'I haven't been looking for anything.'

'You'll soon be in demand when it gets round that you are free,' said he comfortingly.

He did not see much of Clara at the week-end. She was very tired on Sunday, and slept till lunch-time. And she spent the afternoon and evening at her father's. Pillguard lived on the anticipation of the pleasure of Monday night.

However, on Monday afternoon he had a surprise. Barger rang him up from Paddington 4. He said he had a choice titbit of information regarding Mr. Stanley Goodge. He would come along about four if he could get the other conspirators together.

'The reference is a timber business,' said Barger, and waited.

Iredale was delighted with the idea of a game of chess. Starman at Somerset House promised to get off early and repair to Irving Chambers. All was pleasantly arranged, and it did not occur to Pillguard that anything of any importance with regard to Goodge had been discovered.

He received Barger cordially, sent Miss Loob out of

the room, and bade Shanks bring in tea. The Paddington inspector had a knowing expression. 'We've certainly got something on that cove,' said he. 'You can put him into chokee if you like. I suppose you will. I suppose you will. Hard-hearted fellow! But before we talk of pleasure, let us discuss business. Are the other conspirators coming? That's great.'

Barger gulped down his tea and was for going at once.

'And Goodge?' asked Pillguard, now a little curious.

'Goodge and Grafton, ah, yes. You'll be interested to know that he carries on another business, and is assessed under a different name in your district. The question now becomes, which is his real name, Goodge, Grafton or Laurier. If his real name is Laurier, then we can hand over the whole case to you, and you can deal with him as you think fit. You will have the pleasure of scoring one off the repayment agency. I'm sure you will like that. Here are the papers! Look them over tomorrow! After your visit I put his name on the inquiry list, and one of the boys dug out the curious fact that he runs a correspondence cure for drunkenness. You probably know the case: Laurier's Cure for Drunkenness.'

'You surprise me indeed,' said Pillguard, looking at the papers. 'This is certainly going to cause Mr. Goodge some trouble. I may say I had decided to give him a clean bill of health. It almost goes against my conscience to consider his case in a new light.'

'Your conscience, whew!' Barger chuckled. 'If you

don't want to be troubled with it, wash it out. I don't suppose there's much in it for the revenue. I bet the Drunkenness Cure shows a loss. He probably drinks like a fish himself.'

Mr. Pillguard lost two games of chess, one to Starman and one to Barger. Mr. Barger won his against Iredale and against Pillguard. He was in a light-hearted mood and enjoyed himself. When Pillguard remarked sadly that he had played carelessly, Iredale winked knowingly and told him his mind was elsewhere.

'And how is the lady?' he asked. That tickled Barger immensely, because he could not imagine anything more unlikely than that his colleague was in love.

Starman said: 'I saw her photo in the *Sketch*: she had quite a success.'

Iredale said: 'When is that dinner-party coming off?' And Pillguard went red.

Barger was ready to exploit a great joke, but Pillguard looked at his watch hastily and escaped from their badinage. 'I haven't forgotten the dinner-party,' said he to Iredale, as he grasped his hat and umbrella.

'It's still on? Well, I'm glad,' said Iredale. 'Don't take what I said in bad part. I'm sincerely glad.'

He accompanied Pillguard to the stairs. 'I saw her in the *Butterfly Princess*,' he continued ingratiatingly. 'I thought she did well. Inexperienced, of course. She could have made more of the part. But the children liked her, and that is a test of personality.'

'I thought you indiscreet,' said Pillguard gruffly. 'You did not need to give me away before Barger.'

'I'm terribly sorry. I thought he knew about it. Starman knew. It was only a little friendly chaffing on my part.'

'All right,' said Pillguard, who was now in a hurry and wanted to get away.

'You're not offended. You'll come again soon?'

'Not at all. If you like her perhaps you can find her a part. You know the *Butterfly Princess* came off on Saturday, and she's out of a job.'

Iredale cooled a little, as if the inspector had asked him to lend him a substantial sum of money. 'I'll think about that,' said he, and Pillguard shook hands with him warmly.

'I'd take it as a great favour,' said he.

Iredale mumbled something to himself as he returned to rejoin his guests. Pillguard hailed a taxi and went home at once.

He then dressed and went to Clara's. He was highly pleased with himself. He had never been refused theatre seats by Iredale, and he believed that his influence with the theatre magnate was sufficient to procure a part for Clara. But he did not burst upon Clara with the news that he thought he had got her a part. He kept that intelligence in reserve. And Iredale's promise to think about it had banished the thought of Stanley Goodge from his mind.

But Clara seemed distressed when he arrived. She had not begun to dress. Something was on her mind.

'You do look handsome in evening dress,' she said wistfully.

'But you, you have not dressed,' said Pillguard. 'What is the matter?'

'I'm sorry, Harry. This was to be my party. We were going to celebrate. But I'm afraid it's off. I'm dreadfully worried.'

'Ah,' said Pillguard, remembering. 'The cheque has not come. Never mind, it will come tomorrow. I never intended that you should pay. I want you as my guest.'

'Yes, the cheque,' said Clara. 'It did not come this morning, so I telephoned to Goodge's lodgings, and I learned that he and his band had gone to Manchester to fulfil an engagement there. He motored there in father's car yesterday.'

'I shouldn't worry about that. I'll get on to him tomorrow,' said Pillguard. 'Come on, let's have our little party all the same!'

'As you like,' said Clara. 'But I don't feel like going to the theatre. Let's go somewhere and eat. There's more I have to tell you. I'm afraid Goodge is not straight.'

When they were seated at Allegretti's and had had the soup and the fish, Clara felt a little better. She told Pillguard of her visit to her father's on the Sunday, and how she had learned that Dr. Smith had sent Goodge a receipt for the twenty pounds for the car. 'And Jacques calmly accepted it and never said a word,' said she. 'It was that that convinced me that he was crooked. I intended to take it up at once with him this morning, and you can imagine my dismay when I

learned he had given up his room at Lancaster Gate Terrace and gone to Manchester. It's not that it is such a very large amount, but I've been running into debt since I moved into the new flat. I've no savings now to fall back upon, and unless I get an engagement soon, I don't know what I'll do. I signed a three-years lease for the flat. I wish now I'd kept to the old place. I could economise there.'

Mr. Allegretti interrupted their conversation. Pillguard looked up at him in annoyance, but it was impossible to be angry with the rubicund Italian, he was too utterly benevolent.

'I take your advice and all is well,' said he. 'You take a weight off my heart. My brother write letter in Italian and all is arranged.'

'It wasn't quite regular, but we accepted it,' said the inspector. 'I wouldn't have any more doubtful items in your accounts next year if I were you.'

Allegretti motioned to a waiter.

'I have received Christmas present from friend in Napoli,' said he as the waiter came forward with a black bottle which he was still clearing of packing. 'I have a case of it. Good Italian wine, very special. I would ask you the honour of drinking some.'

'With pleasure,' said Pillguard. 'We'll let you know what we think of it.'

Allegretti, having accomplished his delicate mission, withdrew.

'We cleared his accounts in the great rush,' said Pillguard to Clara. 'I shouldn't be surprised if he

invented that brother in Alexandria. But he's not a bad sort. His takings have fallen off a great deal. People are all eating at home now and saving their money.'

'You're much more easy-going than you were, Harry, but I like you better for it,' said Clara. 'Why does the Government want so much money? I'm sure if they were inspected as much as the poor taxpayer they'd find a lot of crooks there, too.'

The word 'crook' brought his mind back to Stanley Goodge.

'Yes, he's a bit of a crook,' said he.

'Who?'

'Goodge. I gave him a clean bill of health, but I shall have to go back on it. I've discovered an extraordinary new fact about him.'

Pillguard then told her of Laurier's Cure for Drunkenness. It did not greatly impress Clara until he explained that Goodge must be getting one allowance for earned income as Goodge and another as Laurier. 'Not a large amount of tax is involved,' said Pillguard. 'But it shows that he is not straight. I'll be pleased to have some hold on him if, as appears, he is cheating you.'

Clara did not seem greatly relieved, but Pillguard gradually brought her to believe that all would be well. He would take into his own hands the whole business of recovering what was due to her.

From the restaurant they went back to her flat. Clara looked at her evening mail. It was all bills. Among

them was a renewal demand for the January instalment of income tax. Pillguard pocketed it. 'Leave that to me,' said he authoritatively. 'They've no right to be harassing you so soon.'

Clara began to have such faith in him that she believed he had the power to stave off the paying of her taxes. She was very sweet to him. It meant a great deal to have a man who loved her, caring for her and taking her troubles off her mind.

Together they composed a very stiff letter to Mr. Stanley Goodge, which Pillguard took away with him, as they did not know Goodge's new address as yet.

Next morning early, Pillguard put in a long-distance call to Manchester on the telephone, and got on to the police. All he required at the moment was the name of the theatre or music-hall where Jacques and his band were performing. Goodge's private address, they could send him at their leisure.

It did not take long. Within an hour Manchester replied and Pillguard despatched Clara's letter. The next thing was to dig out the papers relating to Laurier. He found a very simple account. The only surprise was that it showed a wife. Laurier was allowed one hundred and fifty pounds as a married man. So Laurier had a wife. An official memo said, 'This is a one-man business, one room maintained as office, chief stock-in-trade an elaborate card index. No medicines supplied. Only working expenses, postage and paper.' Mr. Pillguard sent a letter addressed to Laurier asking him to call.

There the business hung fire for a few days. There was nothing to do but await an answer to Clara's letter. On the Friday morning Clara telephoned. She had had a communication. Pillguard asked her to bring it round at once if she could come to the office. Unfortunately he could not leave his desk till lunch-time.

There was not a little stir when Clara appeared. She was kept waiting for a minute, as there was someone with Pillguard, and during that minute the whole staff one after another made some pretext for going into the waiting-room and 'taking a squint at her.'

'She is good-looking. You can't get away from that,' said Miss Loob sadly.

'I thought she had thrown him over,' said the other typist, putting a fresh sheet in her machine.

Miss Loob left the communicating door slightly ajar, but if she expected to hear anything in the nature of love-making on the part of the inspector, she was disappointed. Pillguard shook hands with the taxpayer, and was as formal as the occasion required. Miss Lehman drew a letter from her bag and placed it on Mr. Pillguard's table, unfolding it before him. It was headed 'Jacques Orchestra, Ltd.,' but underneath the printed heading was neatly typed: 'In a/c with Mr. Stanley Goodge, 15 per cent Commission on £50 fee (the *Butterfly Princess*) . . . £7 10s. od.'

'Well, if this isn't the best yet,' exclaimed the inspector. 'Miss Loob!' He called his typist. 'Give me a sheet of blank paper. Please take this down: "Dear Sir, I return the enclosed a/c, which I am at a loss to

understand. My a/c stands as follows, fresh line, capital, Five weeks' salary at thirty pounds . . . 150 pounds, less commission at 15 per cent, 22 pounds 10 shillings. Of that amount I have received on a/c 30 pounds, leaving a balance owing to me of ninety-seven pounds ten shillings. I shall be obliged if you will send me a cheque by return. Otherwise I shall be forced to put the matter in the hands of my solicitors. Yours sincerely. . . ." Miss Lehman, have you your card? Thanks. You might type this, Miss Loob, at once, on this blank sheet of paper, and fill in Miss Lehman's address from her card. Wait, I have another letter. Do this one on official paper. "Sir, With regard to Assessment, please quote number in reply, Adolf Laurier, of No. 25, Larrington Street, I should be obliged if you would inform me whether the business of Laurier's Cure for Drunkenness is your property, and if so why a full return of your income from other sources for the years, etc., was not made?" I'll sign that myself.'

Miss Loob, stealing covert glances at Clara, meekly scribbled in shorthand in her efficient way, and then retired to her room, where the rattling of her typewriter at once became audible.

'We'll post these together. So that both letters arrive by the same post. If I'm not mistaken they will have a remarkable persuasive power on the illusive Mr. Jacques.'

Next day Pillguard received another surprise. Mrs. Laurier called at the office.

A faded, honest-looking woman in spectacles, shab-

bily dressed, rather like a working dressmaker who takes odd jobs home, confronted the inspector.

‘Adolf Laurier is your husband?’ queried Pillguard. ‘Why has he not come himself?’

‘My husband is not in London at the moment. I carry on the business, and can answer any questions. What was it you wanted to know?’

‘I take it you and your husband are living together; you are not separated or divorced?’

‘No.’

‘We have information that your husband carries on another business under the name of Goodge. Can you furnish any details of that business? What we require of Mr. Laurier is an explanation why the details of his income from that source were not disclosed.’

Mrs. Laurier did not seem surprised or perturbed. Her beady eyes behind the spectacles did not change their expression.

‘I know nothing about that. If he does, I suppose he is assessed elsewhere,’ said she.

‘I’m afraid that is a serious matter,’ said the inspector. ‘The personal attendance of your husband will be absolutely necessary. Perhaps you will be good enough to write to him to that effect. A further letter will be sent to him today.’

Having thus got rid of Mrs. Laurier, Pillguard dictated two letters, one to her husband and the other to the Income Tax Protective Society. He felt he had Stanley Goodge in a net, and was confident he would settle Clara’s business and at the same time bring a tax

dodger to book. His old self was working on the case, the zealous pursuer of revenue for the Crown.

Clara, who had been neglected by Mr. Sawyer since the closing down of the *Butterfly Princess*, received an invitation to dine with him again. She was agreeably surprised, and would have accepted, but Pillguard advised her to plead another engagement.

‘But I can ask him about Jacques,’ said she. ‘He has a thousand-pound share in the orchestra, and after all, that means he has some control.’

‘Yes, quite right,’ said Pillguard. ‘That is why I say put him off. Offer him another evening later. You ought to await a reply from Manchester. If you get your money, and I believe you will, why place yourself under another obligation to Mr. Sawyer? But if not, by all means try what he can do.’

But the next day by the afternoon post Clara received her reply, and was greatly shocked.

The letter was not from Jacques, but was signed James Ponting, secretary, and it enclosed a copy of the receipt which she had given Jacques in the theatre.

‘In view of your receipt, a copy of which please find hereto annexed, we fail to understand the claims put forth in your letter of the 5th instant.’

Pillguard also received a letter, which was equally brief, but was signed by Goodge himself: ‘All questions relating to my return of income tax should be referred to my agents in the matter, the Income Tax Protective Society, yours truly.’ Nothing more. He also received

a letter from the Income Tax Protective Society, acknowledging his communication. 'With regard to the matter of your inquiry concerning the income of our client, Mr. Stanley Goodge, we shall be glad to take this up with you at your earliest convenience.'

That letter was the perfection of routine neatness and style. Pillguard gazed at it admiringly, and despite his assurance that he had got Goodge in a net, he felt that his business with him had suffered a set-back. It was not usual for defaulters to come to the question promptly.

He assumed that Jacques had decided to get out of the mess he was in as quickly as possible. That was wise on his part. 'Pay and get it over' was by far the best policy. He reflected that perhaps that augured well for Clara's account.

But when after the office closed he went along to Clara's he found her in a bad state of nerves. She showed him the letter she had received and the copy of her receipt.

'Why!' said Pillguard. 'You have signed a receipt for payment in full for your engagement at the Arena. How came you to do that?'

'I was in a hurry. I scarcely glanced at it when I was signing it.'

'That's bad,' said Pillguard. 'And you had no written agreement as to the salary you were to receive. I'm afraid that in a court of law you'd stand no earthly. And your father gave him a receipt for the money for the car. He has done us all round.'

'Don't let's talk about it! I feel terribly upset,' said Clara.

They had dinner together in her flat, sent up from below. Clara could not be persuaded to go out to a restaurant. Pillguard tried to keep off the subject of Jacques, but could not. It was uppermost in his mind, and would not be denied.

'Your best course now is to take the matter to Sawyer,' said he. 'Sawyer knows the part you had, and the gross amount which he paid out to Jacques in respect of yourself and the whole troupe. He can readily assess what would be your fair share of that amount. He actually offered to pay your salary in advance on his own account, did he not?'

'He was very good. I've nothing against him.'

'I'm not suggesting he was anything but honourable as far as you were concerned,' said Pillguard. 'Quite the contrary. Possibly I did him an injustice. If he paid you now right away out of his own pocket, I should have nothing to say against it. He's a rich man. He can afford it. He has lost money, but another hundred pounds is a mere fleabite to him.'

Clara said she would go, but after dinner she lay on the couch, and her eyes filled with tears.

'I can't go to him, Harry, I can't. You are right. He would pay me out of his own pocket. He might ask Goodge about it afterwards and he might not. He is touchy where I am concerned, and might not want to discuss me with another man.'

'I should not be thin-skinned about it,' said Pill-

guard. 'He engaged you. He is responsible, and, as a gentleman, I think he would recognise the fact.'

'But I've had so much from him already and I've refused money from him not once but often. Don't you see what sort of a position I am in. I am living in his flat, and I know he would never press me for the rent. He would be willing to support me here, no, not immorally, he's not that sort. He's the sort of man who wants to have the *réclame* of being seen about with a smart woman. His love-making ends in sending flowers. It never goes further. But I could not accept his money and go on living in that way.'

Pillguard reflected on this in silence for a while.

'All right, cut it out!' said he at last.

Clara cried softly; and he went across to the couch and sat down beside her and tried to comfort her.

'You are seeing it all out of proportion,' said he. 'You will get plenty more engagements, and forget this bad debt. What does it matter?'

Clara cried still more, and he put his arms round her and kissed her. He had wanted to do so for some time, but was afraid that she would repulse him indignantly. It seemed to him like taking a mean advantage of her condition. But he wanted to kiss her. He was not so unhappy as she was about all this. The human desire of his life was embodied in that limp figure, as beautiful to him in tears as in happiness.

Clara did not in any way resist him. Nor did her tears cease to flow. Pillguard had not kissed her in that way before, consecutively and continuously, so that

her lips were not free to utter a word. To him it seemed to mean a new certainty, and he became passionate. She was his. She could not but be his.

'But I must give up this beautiful flat,' she cried, breaking free for a moment. 'I cannot go on living here.'

'What would you do?' asked Pillguard.

'I must sublet it,' said Clara, staring into the room as if appraising its value to a new tenant.

Pillguard laughed and kissed her, first on one wet cheek and then on the other.

'Then you have found a tenant,' he exclaimed. 'I will be your tenant.'

'What, and drive me out?'

'No, we can share it. I don't believe I am very far wrong, but don't be angry with me if I am, but . . .'

Mr. Pillguard broke down. 'Oh, I can't make a speech,' he blurted out. 'But I love you. I want you, I can't live without you.'

Clara stared at him through her tears, and he tightened his hold on her and drew her to him. She did not repulse him. He lay a long while on the couch with her, kissing her eyes till they were dried of her tears and wet from his lips.

Two evenings later Clara accepted Mr. Sawyer's invitation to dinner. 'I have news for you,' she said. 'I am engaged to be married to Mr. Pillguard.'

If the rich man was taken aback he did not show it. It is true he did not reply at once, but that was his

habit. You should not expect an immediate reply to any important communication. He read the menu card and ordered dinner. Clara was annoyed with him, and took the earliest opportunity to tell him how Jacques had cheated her. To that he replied:

‘That is scandalous. I’ll communicate with Mr. Goodge at once.’

Mr. Sawyer seemed greatly perturbed. ‘I’m sorry, very, very sorry,’ said he. ‘It is my fault. I thought a separate engagement had been signed with you, and after the first night’s great success I asked the management to double your salary. Only then did I learn that we had signed on the whole of Jacques’ company at a lump sum, which he would distribute according to his private arrangements.’

This was a long speech for Mr. Sawyer, and Clara was much flattered by it.

‘Now I understand better. You were quite entitled to blame me, though in a way I was innocent in the matter.’

‘I have not blamed you in the least.’

‘You have been pretty distant with me for some time, and I confess I thought you ungrateful. I humbly apologise.’

Much later in the dinner Mr. Sawyer tendered her his full-hearted congratulations on her engagement.

Clara and Harry Pillguard were married at St. Peter’s, Kentish Town, and her father gave the bride away. Emily wore her new dress as bridesmaid. Mr. Sawyer was present, as were also Mr. Iredale, Mr.

Starman and Mr. Barger. 'I hope,' said the happy bridegroom to Mr. Iredale, 'that you will accept an invitation to dine with my wife and myself a month from today.'

Pillguard had applied for special leave for his honeymoon at Torquay. Miss Loob handled the relative correspondence, and was glad and sad in turns. But she congratulated her chief. There was a presentation of a clock from the staff which they hoped would strike only happy hours for the inspector and his wife.

The Income Tax Protective Society shielded their client, taking upon themselves the blame for the omission of Laurier's income—an oversight. They had had the accounts in the office, but owing to the difference in name they had been wrongly pigeon-holed. They apologised in a letter, beautifully written and composed. Pillguard laid all the papers before Mr. Vincey, in case the Board wished to prosecute, but the latter said they could not waste precious time chasing rats. The full amount owing would be exacted, and that would have to suffice. Mr. Pillguard's disappointment was mitigated by the fact that Jacques had settled with Clara for the full amount owing to her. Mr. Sawyer had effected this by the simple device of handing the money over to Goodge and making him send it to Clara with an apology. If later Sawyer recovered this money from Goodge is doubtful. Indeed, the thousand pounds which he had put into Jacques' Orchestra proved an unremunerative investment.

In the hotel in Torquay, Pillguard, fumbling in his

pockets, found a crumpled receipt and handed it to Clara, smiling. It was the receipt for her January instalment of income tax, which he had paid on the day after he had taken the demand note from Clara's flat.

‘Isn't that wonderful?’ exclaimed the radiant Clara. ‘The Income Tax Inspector paid the income tax himself.’

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A CHILD IN THE THEATRE

We all know the glamour of the theatre; we can feel for the actress the thrill of applause, the excitement of success. But what of the tedium, the labour and the jealousies that lie behind? Few disappointments are as bitter, few paths as stony, as those of the struggling actress.

In this novel we see behind the curtain, and from backstage follow the career of the public's darling—Amy Ida, 'the face that decorated play after play'. We are allowed to see her through the penetrating eyes of James Marsh, her Press agent, and through those of her former school mistress—Vivian Garson, whose own affairs afford a dual interest throughout the book. For Vivian too takes to the stage, but hers is a harder task than Amy's. Struggling valiantly to keep to her own standards of conduct, Vivian does not capture the public imagination as Amy does.

Theatrical success is here analysed in the most readable of novels. Rachel Ferguson's brilliant story will never be outdated while the world of the theatre preserves its inimitable individuality.

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THE BRONTËS WENT TO WOOLWORTH'S

FALSE GODDESSES

SARA SKELTON

VICTORIAN BOUQUET

POPULARITIES WIFE

THE STAG AT BAY

NYMPHS AND SATIRES

CELEBRATED SEQUELS

A HARP IN LOWNDES SQUARE

ALAS, POOR LADY

PASSIONATE KENSINGTON

A FOOTMAN FOR THE PEACOCK

EVENFIELD

THE LATE WIDOW TWANKEY

MEMOIRS OF A FIR-TREE

A STROLL BEFORE SUNSET

ROYAL BOROUGH

A CHILD IN THE THEATRE

By

RACHEL FERGUSON
(‘Rachel’ of *Punch*)



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For
AMY LAWRENCE
AND
ADA BEESLEY

CHAPTER I

QUITE often, the Georgian reporters, furtively tapping pencil on notebook, had time to wonder how old she was. *The Stage Year-Book* and *Who's Who* were silent upon that point—alone.

These Victorian actresses, Fleet Street occasionally thought, started professional life at an age when normal children (one's own) were still shrieking in the playground, and it was inevitable that women like Amy Ida should have sunk into the public consciousness in the manner of a younger Albert Memorial, again at an age when many actresses of to-day were starting their careers.

Here, the elderly, or Edwardian, reporter would mentally resurrect the case of Phyllis Dare, who, making her bow at eleven years old in *Pluebell in Fairyland*, was, by most of his colleagues of post-war vintage, believed to be over sixty. One youngster had admitted he thought she was dead. Difficult to convince that brood that she was still in her comely forties.

Sometimes the Georgian reporter—young, daring, trench-developed in initiative, owning no traditions, and visiting his luncheon—would hint to Amy Ida that she, as a child actress, was, perhaps, originally noticed by the current impresario when dancing to what he erroneously described as 'the barrel-organ.'

'Oh, I had no early struggles—if that's what you're looking for.'

It was true—in a way. The tussles came with adolescence.

Upon that period the Edwardians were silent (more or less), and the Georgians couldn't remember.

Secure, one could be what one liked, could afford even to play at regretting the 'barrel organ' road to celebrity. It appealed to a dramatic vein in Amy Ida which thirty-nine years on the stage was beginning to foster. . . .

James Marsh, her Press agent, sometimes said that the

pressmen, in barrel-organ mood, had been reading stage novels a quarter of a century old. You went to those writers for all the best stage lies. The modern novelists knew far too much. 'Like surgeons. Showing all the guts. And the public either doesn't believe 'em, or hates it. Give me the barrel-organ every time, Amy, and the impresario in his astrakhan collar, with lechery written all over his Havana—oh, marvellous! And then he sees some little beast dancing in the gutter, and he says to friend Kolinsky: "By heaven!" says he, "*she's* my leading lady!"' Then, with facetious bitterness, to Amy Ida: 'And he trains her, dear (but not for more than half a chapter, because we all want to get on to the diamonds and titles, and the proposal and the grey-haired châtelaine mother saying: "Is *this* Mavis? Dear Tom, I am so happy. . . ." Or, if you like the other story, she is led to ruin and has an illy-gilly through naughty champagne, if you'll pardon the word.' And it was as she pardoned the word that his synopses were apt to peter out. . . .

Scanning the faces at Amy Ida's impromptu evenings, James Marsh would mentally date the owners by their reception of the illy-gilly banter: A (dazed, about 1880); B (displeased, 1878); C (delighted, 1900); D (shriek of joy, 1915).

And Amy Ida. The lovely face, undated, classic, rounded, as nearly expressionless as a live thing may be. The face that decorated play after play, that the intelligent pit quite unconsciously paid to see, and which Agate had said such useful things about—highly quotable, if you forgot the sting in their immense usefulness and quotability.

Often, working over Amy Ida's career, as a clerk over his ledgers, James Marsh, on Sunday morning, would note that Agate stated that Tallulah's personality and effect were 'husky and orchidaceous.' But this, with an unmistakable rider to the effect that the girl was also an actress. Whereas with Amy Ida there was a tendency to: 'And then, of course, we have Miss Ida, moving through three acts in cumulative beauty. . . .'

CHAPTER II

IT HAD only taken three months for Mrs. Bowker to grasp the fact that she had been allotted something special in the way of babies. So unlike the boys. Probably took, if one had time to go through the albums, after one's own side. Herbert, poor dear, was no Anti—something. Or was it Apollo? Or Adonis? One really enjoyed taking the child out in her pram, and when the first sunshine fluff of infancy fell off her head (overnight, as it always seemed), that hadn't mattered much. For in due course appeared that blue-black down that was evidently going to decree for the Irish colleen type. Quite as attractive, so the players said at Mabel Bowker's winter whists. And—the silver photograph frame or matchbox won—the contestants, with sound of full, rustling silk petticoats, would resume their sealskin jackets, ad-just spotted veils round Princess-of-Wales coiffures and over fur toques, with peculiar twist of fingers to secure the ends at the back, and, skirts held high (or above the ankle), would disperse down the road. If the night were wet, a stray cabby was sometimes hailed; if he were not in sight, a great sponging of skirts took place within the house, and braid, ripped off in loops by high-heeled boots, was sewn on once more.

Often, Herbert Bowker returned in time from the insurance office to have a pleasant word with the lady. Sometimes a neighbour dined, and Mr. Bowker would hurry to the wine-merchant and return with a bottle of sherry in a paper bag. On these occasions, Mrs. Bowker would bring out the plated *épergne*, and from its innards cause to spout a jet of *smilax* upon the cloth beneath. The *smilax* pointed a green finger at each corner, where stood four filigree containers in the clever guise of slippers, which were filled with sugar almonds, chocolate creams, and a certain square rose jujube of an unexpectedly hard and silencing quality. Into the translucent cubes the teeth of little Amy Bowker were often fixed. Licking one (it would last a long afternoon) and holding it up to the light made everything look rose-coloured.

CHAPTER III

CONTINUOUS praise sets up suggestion in the most unlikely minds. The admiration shown for Amy as infant, as toddler, as little child, had its effect upon her mother. From being a member of the family the child became potentially, subconsciously, an asset. Maternal competition, always veiled and quite inevitable, had no place where Amy was in question. Mabel Bowker experienced sensations of growing complacence and a necessity to kiss the baby oftener than its brothers or her husband.

Pride broke down at the child's wardrobe: conventionally susceptible to the raised eyebrow, Mrs. Bowker conformed, and the adorable baby face was duly eclipsed in poke bonnets, her body bundled into pelisses trimmed with pipings of beaver. In the house, frilled pinafores. In the winter, Amy and her contemporaries were swaddled in coats and gaiters and scarves to such an extent that no warmth could penetrate that dead-weight, and colds and chilblains (impossible to rub) were rife. Nor was it permissible to go hatless into the garden in the summer, and, in a cartwheel of muslin with rucks round the crown, Amy Bowker would spend her Julys and Augusts, warmed by the city sun, breathed upon by the airs of Streatham. Few other children of those creeper-hung, detached villas of the 'seventies went to country or sea, and the still afternoons were apt to be marked by the apparition of a Bentley boy over the wall, or by sounds of quarrel and croquet.

It was Harry Bentley who had once dared Amy to kiss an earthworm. It was Harry who, eating a peardrop, had discovered that 'the juice spat red,' and shouted: 'Let's play we've got conslumshon!—I'm the doctor who says you've got it. Now you cough *loud*, and then spit out.' And the doctor, forgetting his presumptive immunity, led the consumptives so heartily that windows went up, and Mrs. Bowker, machining, called out, 'Whatever *is* the matter?'

A stimulating family, the Bentleys. For two days, one summer, in her eighth year, Ted and Harry came to fisticuffs as to which of them should marry Amy. But on the third day,

Harry, backed up by Ted, hit her with a piece of hose-pipe for abstracting a croquet ball. Reminded by an admonitory Mrs. Bowker of this matrimonial project and contrasting it with recent events, they stared at her with sincere amazement.

The head that belonged to the other party wall belonged also to an old lady called Thring, whose contribution to Amy's summer afternoons was confined to ejaculations of, 'Oh, how *very* pretty!' as the little girl occupied herself in the unclued plays of childhood, and to offerings of fruit and plum cake, which Amy stood on tiptoe to reach. Miss Thring was believed locally not to be quite 'right' in the head, and Herbert Bowker once, in reference to her gifts to his daughter, observed to his wife that cucumbers and marrows might be expected next over the garden wall. 'Cormoran and Blunderbore, be mine, be mine!' Mrs. Bowker answered that Miss Thring couldn't. 'She doesn't grow anything but dahlias,' Amy, who seldom joined in parental talk, added, 'O'Gorman's the milkman.'

The Blunderbore remark had been made by Herbert Bowker that evening when, calling in his daughter to bed, he had extricated her from an alfresco snack of plum cake, two greengages, a handful of gooseberries, a screw of peppermints, and five gingernuts.

Later, Amy was sick; but it was, she thought, all very pleasant. Mrs. Bowker was exasperated. Three children knocked nonsense out of you. You took things as they came, she said. For sickness there was seidlitz powder, for general condition, Lamplough's Pyretic Saline, advertised inside the buses by a picture of a helpful, bearded doctor taking leave of a grandmother, while the family stood by looking agreeable. For internal troubles there was syrup of figs, which all her children loathed in spite of the way the label round the bottle said they loved it; and for guard there was a nursemaid, ever-changing and uniformly stupid, but full of good nature. All children, however loved, were left much to servants. It was said by the charitable that Amy's close association with a succession of nursemaids may account for that very faint cockney accent which she was never quite to lose.

CHAPTER IV

AT EIGHT and a half years old, Amy went to a private day school near her home. The nursemaid led her there each morning, Mrs. Bowker brought her home at twelve-thirty. Her mother, comparing notes with Mrs. Bentley and other friends in shops and over the whist tables, agreed that it was the best school in the district.

Herbert Bowker, in recognition of the first morning of her new experience, took off his top hat to his daughter as he left for the City, and made her a joke about insuring her life (because it was a 'good' one) at 'specially favourable rates' in case the mistresses worked her to death.

The hint of premature demise did not weigh upon the child. She sensed a joke rather than understood it, nor had she observed any gaps in friendship consequent upon schooling. But she ran into the garden to find and inform a Bentley boy. Boys knew what was what. . . . Ted might have something to say, some warning to give, in which case it wasn't yet too late, and a tear and a wail or two would bring Mamma to one's side in a jiffy. And then life, once more, would be walks with Clara, and the garden, and Miss Thring, and coming down to be among the ladies at Mamma's card-parties.

She shrilled 'Harr-ee! Ted!' and the head of Harry rose above the brickwork. Master Bentley, this spring morning, was neither truculent nor matrimonial; his soul was with the hasty binding of his iron hoop-stick with twine.

'Hullo?'

'I'm going to school to-day.'

Harry appeared to weigh the question, then said: 'Got a bit 've scaling-wax?'

'I'm going off *now* for the first day,' she half begged, but Harry's ear, cocked to an unheard voice from his home, sank from sight. After this the walk to school was, somehow, a little frightening.

CHAPTER V

THE mistresses, if caught unawares, heads together, smiles of vicarious motherhood upon their faces, reserved their conversation for unofficial hours. Miss Head, who 'took' elocution, literature, and composition, was enthusiastic.

'... *Isn't* she! She's Mrs. Bowker's child. Amy makes the others look like wood, in class.' Then, a little shyly, 'She could do *anything*.'

Constance Head had made up her mind to discovery; was schooling herself in advance against a favouritism that might be going to be inevitable. One would keep one's eyes closely upon the textbook, but there were other ways—the ways of imagination, which her own subjects so admirably provided. To sense when those marvel-blue eyes widened or deepened at Tennyson or Shelley . . . but one would be fair. Each child should have her chance, her verse to speak, her response sounded to the full, her comment respected.

Her colleagues, scenting defeat for themselves, accepted the child as just one more to whom to teach essentials. It was certainly Constance's triumph.

Miss Head, the year being at the spring, heroically resisted God's in His heaven (which they had learnt last term), but was unable to relinquish its sister lines. The class would read, verse by verse, in turn.

'And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances *with* the daffodils'

announced Amy Bowker, in the ghost of a cockney accent.

Miss Head raised her eyes from the book and stared. Internally she was crying, 'How dare a face like that put the accent on all the wrong words by instinct?'

Constance Head, in her Morris gown of copper-coloured serge, a hammered silver chain about her thinning neck, was looking positively angry. She did not know that she had ceased to think, and had spoken her thought.

'But—this is incredible. . . .'

And Amy, timid, abashed, repeated it civilly as coda to the lesson and closed the book. 'But this is iniquitable.'

Miss Head smiled. Keen, original as far as might be, the star of Montessori with its drawings-out, its gadgets to develop *nous* and teach fingers to use their five wits, its mid-morning whisper-break when all the children, turn by turn, are summoned in below-breath, had not yet risen for her encouragement. Co-education as a coming possibility had barely reached the stage of facetious verbal exchange, nor the mischievous free-will tenets of Garden Suburbanism. One struggled on alone, ever with a sense of guilt at the smallest innovation. One had, for instance, insinuated into the final fifteen minutes of poetry lesson that mind development interlude, by which one sought to learn what the verses had conveyed to the class when one had oneself made the astonished discovery that 'education' meant 'drawing out'. The interlude one had christened 'mind pictures.' Many and strange were one's rewards.

Victoria Dene had, under pressure, admitted that Casabianca turned her memory to an August Bank Holiday afternoon on a Thames steamboat. Pressed, she said that the deck *was* very hot, and what was a Casaby anchor?

Flora Stone said she *liked* the doctor who had 'called in another' (an irrelevance which tried Constance Head to the full), and Flora, brightening, added that the doctor who was called reminded her of an uncle (Richard). He, too, it appeared, had red hair and large hands. Here the class became really animated.

'But he was a *cruel* man, Flora! What does it mean to you that "he was happier using the knife than in trying to save the limb"?''

Here, unfortunately, the doctor's daughter brought Miss Head to naught. 'But, Miss Head, you do use knives in hospitals. Daddy said that when our cook fell down the area steps it was only an operation that saved her whole leg from coming off.'

Revolution set in.

'Why was it kind of Jesus to kill Emmy?'

'She was in dreadful pain, Victoria.'

'But—Daddy doesn't kill people when they're hurt—'
'She couldn't be saved, Flora.' (*Oh, you little wretch!*)

It was her first failure. Back in her bedroom, guarded north, south, east, and west by the ladies of Burne-Jones and Rossetti, Alma-Tadema and Albert Moore, in various stages of uncorseted dejection, Constance Head gradually, painfully, saw that the poem was a piece of muddled theology eked out by crudish histrionics. What was Mr. Tennyson (resting now at his beautiful Freshwater home) thinking of? There were, of course, still Wordsworth and Longfellow.

Oh the long and cruel winter

Oh the . . . something and the something . . .

Every child, it seemed, enjoyed the rhythm of that, just as—their initial shyness broken down—the afterclass discussions threatened to become unmanageable. Except where those with no ideas were concerned.

Amy Bowker.

One had invited her opinion of 'The Battle of Blenheim,' and she had grown pink (that wild-rose face framed in its grave, smoky curls!) and faltered that she 'didn't like it very much, if you don't mind.' Miss Head, in secret agreement, happily asked why.

'I—I don't know. I don't like po'try. I don't think.'

Well . . . that left composition.

Unconsciously, Constance Head was spoiling for the whimsical. If, in short, Amy was going to be unable to give one child-mind (that revealing, fragrant thing), then let, oh let! her be involuntarily funny.

The subject? M'm . . . there were conventions . . . the parents, the principal to consider. Constance Head plunged. 'My Best Friend'

But it was the Class Bore who came out top with a respectable little essay upon her Bible; the Class Prig who was runner-up with a paper upon her probably tiresome mother; the Class Slow-Worm, Victoria Dene, who wrote that her best friend was Mr. Henry Irving. 'I do not know him but I love him as my friend in imagination. I hope some day to

meet him, but think this will not never be as he is miles from our house which is called Sittingbourne. I have five post cards all of Mr. Irving except one of Miss Ellen Terry. And so he is my best friend.

It was the doctor's daughter who got herself disqualified and a lesson-mark for a suspected flight of facetiousness in selecting her Saturday sixpence as her best friend. 'Am I hungry?' wrote the annoying child, 'then, reader, it will buy me sweets and biscuits, or should one be weary it will carry her home in a bus.'

Amy had confined herself to her cat. (Oh, those domestic pet essays!) Round and over his person she went, conscientious as a house-agent, for two and a half neat pages. She enumerated his claws, the hairs of his head were numbered. And Miss Head, defeated, gave her 'nine out of ten,' and thought of lethal chambers.

Very soon Amy began to like and enjoy school life, especially Tuesdays and Fridays. Arithmetic with Miss Within. Sums were no trouble, and fun. At home she would do pages of fractions for idle amusement. She rose to, and remained at, the top of the form in arithmetic class. Poetry with Miss Head, she told her mother, was rather dull and silly; but Amy learnt the allotted portion while the others struggled with the first four lines. And every one was nice . . . the child enjoyed the pleasant looks of the mistresses, the extra friendly manner and backward glances of the elder girls; help, if needed, was always forthcoming from some quarter; etiquettes were broken in the way of sudden, welcomed kisses and pats; occasional unpunctuality met with tolerance. 'She didn't give me a lesson-mark, Mamma, but she *must* have noticed, 'cos Flora got an awful wiggling *and* a mark, last week. . . '

Amy was at home in the classroom very soon, and at the sound of the midday bell it was good to run home, to re-explore the garden, to remember the Bentleys (unaccountably forgotten of late), and on Saturdays to plan the spending of a penny. There was a little shop which sold bottles of scent lashed to a card. They had a violet tied round the neck, but they were threepence. But sugar-sticks were two a

penny, stout and satisfying. Or there was a peppermint rock at one farthing a bar, with 'London Rock' in scarlet letters all down its length. Once she had found a boot-button embedded in the stick. Baffling, but not deterrent. Or there were post cards of very famous ladies: Marcia in a blaze of light in *The Sign of the Cross*—a Marian Terry; Mr. Wilson-Barrett (confused for a long time with the gentleman who made the London Rock). There was the penny packet of seeds and discovery that they grew, and experiments with cress on flannel. There was, marking the year with Christmas, one's birthday, when Daddy gave one a shilling, and with it an overpowering sensation of responsibility at control of such a sum. Would it never be spent? One must try to get rid of it somehow! It was an endless sum when you met it in hand and out of arithmetic lesson. 'I go into a shop and I buy . . .' That was simple practice, and one spent hundreds of pounds in a morning—until the bell rang. But a shilling to spend was absolutely different, and mamma, her lap laden, gave a little cry of dismay at the violet scent, and said ladies used White Rose or Jockey Club, tasted and ejected a Cupid's Whisper, admired the chenille monkey, and kissed one for the flowers. And there was an iced cake with one's name on, and a party, and parcels and a pair of red shoes and another kiss. And one wore one's best frock, and one of mamma's ladies said, so that one heard: 'She's a picture, Mabel,' and one's eyes filled with tears of shame and sudden unhappiness.

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS in the autumn term that Vivian Garson became a teacher at Amy Bowker's school. It was under the light of moaning incandescent that the staff discussed her.

Corn-coloured sweep of hair . . . quite good features . . . oh, nostrils far too wide. Then the chorus. Her eyes . . . odd . . . crooked . . . *slitty*! that's just the word, Constance. Yes, quite Jappy. Too young, of course, but, oh yes! college education. Mother dead soon after she was born? Musician's daughter . . . oh, nobody famous. Only twenty? She might be twenty-five. . . I know. . . .

Over cocoa, they knew.

They did not know that Vivian Garson had received her first proposal at fourteen in that northern county where the Garsons kept, in a small way, open house, and where, on Sundays, the clever youth of the huge town—young, unkempt men who, later, inevitably migrated to London to become moving spirits, directors of theatres, and, in the last resort, writers upon the drama—assembled round Julian Garson to hear him play the piano for love. Then beer till the small hours, and Vivian Garson getting deliberately tipsy for the experience. ('Father, you've often said one ought to have every experience.' 'Well, then, I'm a very dangerous and stupid man. And probably a liar.') And wavering with beer, shouting with giggles, she was removed by Jimmy Marsh, to be by him dispassionately put to bed. ('What the dooce are these things?' 'Sus—sus——' 'All right. I can wait . . . suspenders? Right. I thought the girls all wore garters?')

It was possibly a dawning dislike of the beer-and-garter aspect which made Julian Garson cast round for a life for his child; that, and a decline in his own prospects. The musical north was no joke to squeeze your rent from, where every other person seemed to outplay you, and you all lived by taking in each other's melodic washing. And one's age. . . . When you are over fifty you must practise more and more, and the grace-notes of Chopin cease to delight and become apprehension, and the stretches called for by Brahms merely split your knuckles. Beer. Arterio-sclerosis. Hell.

Vivian must have a chance, and she must earn. Music was only the food of love, after all. What did daughters do? Hobson? Jimmy?

'Governess, sir.'

'Shop. Tea and fruit-balls, and an extra lollipop for the little dear—*à la Cranford*.'

'Tah! I tell you, boy, I'm serious.'

'Teach school.'

And teach school it was, in the end; the only alternative for the daughters of gentlemen, however bad the school. But one could still toy with the notion of parting. There was still two hundred in the bank . . . that half-arranged musical

directorship of Howdlie's theatre . . . two concert fees owing for deputizing . . . some jobs of transposition for the Hallé concert. . . .

He waited. One didn't part with Vivian. When she leaves a room the whole room goes out too . . . and who will shout at my jokes? Vivian as a schoolmarm in a flannel shirt with a high collar and a man's tie, and her yellow hair in this hideous little bun on the top that all the gals were sporting. . . . Vivian directing youth when she couldn't direct herself. She was a life-lover, and they were always on the wrong side of the fence. A fatal susceptibility, capricious and devastating. An all-or-nothing mind, and a lack of reticence quite damnable. ('Pride, my good man! Where does it lead you? Nowhere!') Vivian, who had at fifteen swept the yellow streak of hair from her forehead, and cried to one that she would walk barefoot to London if William Terriss would kiss her at the journey's end. And meant it, in spite of her cocked, humorous clown's eye. But the walk back would be barefoot too, and no kiss. Nemmind! One had had it

Proudly, regretfully, her father traced the point of view to himself. Poor Minne had been just an admirable home-keeper who put silver vases, and draped sticky Oriental cloths studded with discs of glass, upon the Bechstein concert grand. Poor Minne, who, the eldest of four, had lectured to be swept off her ministering feet by Davies *Solemn Melody*, and upon whom he had played the trick of pealing out 'Ta-ra-ra-Boom-de-ay' as a fugue upon the church organ.

Was it Bach, Julian?

Did she like it?

It was beautiful!

It was Lottie Collins's famous song, my dear.

Oh, Julian! Ought you to have?

Why not? If you liked it, God probably will, too. Is God only to be allotted one *tempo* and the heavy composers to listen to?

Oh, Julian!

But it was doubtless from Minne that Vivian derived her tactless, downright north-country honesty, her horrific frank-

ness about herself and the world in general. And it was this mixture that was to become a schoolmarm.

But there was time, and two hundred in the bank. And, quite suddenly, and enthusiastically abetted by Vivian, Julian Garson knew that he must have a hearing before he threw in his hand and became a music teacher, one of the odd-job men of art, and that he and Vivian must go to London and take the St. James's Hall for a recital. With their living expenses, advertisements, posters, programmes, and journey money two hundred ought to cover it easily, with something to spare. And, having decided upon the step, he permitted himself a delicate orgy of self-condemnation upon the futility, selfishness, and unwisdom of the project. And Vivian listened, fascinated, sensitively reacting to each aspect of the plan, slitted eyes growing wide with advance terror of the gutter, closed with the ecstasy of success and father as a London pianist. Vivian, upstairs in her bedroom, rehearsing an appeal to the wealthy women emerging from the Princess Theatre to buy a matchbox—only one. You see, it isn't for me, but father's not had anything much to eat to-day, and one can get *two* sausage-rolls for a penny if they're stale . . . and, the vision strengthening, Vivian turning away with brimming eyes at the pathos of yesterday's pastry—and rushing downstairs to hug father and to ask him if he had really had enough supper. . . .

And preparations went forward; lodgings were secured in a suburb called Lewisham; the Howdlie house was given up (father and daughter horrified at the finality, the drastic gesture, and enjoying it immensely); Jimmy and Hobson and the rest at the station, clamouring that the excursion train should bring them to the recital, and that would be champion, and the Garsons moving southwards, each simultaneously convinced that the expedition was doomed by a private devil and blessed by a personal God.

To the end of her life Vivian Garson would remember the night of her father's London *début*. Intimates would touch upon her childhood, and Vivian was instantly back in the concert hall in one characteristic gesture: caught breath,

clenched fist raised and shaking, eyes closed, the sensitive lips parted.

She had hovered at the side of the platform, philosophically anticipating the fact that a stall among the audience would bring disgrace attendant upon flooding tears at Schumann and intolerable fidgets at the Hungarian Suite, to which one must imperatively dance. And then the final Chopin Impromptu in A flat, with its unbearable pathos, the hysteric sobs it racked you with, its delusive gaiety. The beginning. Two reflective, descending notes, and the silver wheel set spinning — gently — then faster, faster, faster, fastest; and then the regretful slowing down, midway, to sadness; then pick up! On, on, faster, faster, and at last those heavier spins which meant that the wheel knew it was grinding to a standstill.

And the private devil had prompted Julian Garson to play the Impromptu third upon the programme instead of last, because he loved it so. . . .

Vivian, hovering had accepted the alteration, proud of Julian's artistic whim. And just as he was sighting that mid-way sadness, something happened in his daughter's ears. This was no fulfilled relaxation that fingers were assuring you, but a too-early death.

He had forgotten the next phrase.

A second his hands rested trembling upon the keyboard, striving for self-control. It lasted a year, while you held your breath and the world was blotted out. Fetch him the score? No good. A sin against beauty. He had failed Chopin. He rose, clumsily, noisily, and walked off the platform, and the agent said he must finish the programme, or a thing called a breach of faith would have been committed.

Brandy. It was all right really. Mr. Garson. Stromberg himself had once begun his part in concerto in the wrong key, and had had the presence of mind (ha, ha!) to stop dead and pretend the piano stool needed adjusting before beginning again in the right key. And so the breach of faith was healed and Julian Garson finished his recital. And for the rest he played all the music he hated most because he hated it and played it rather badly. Some thunder-and-blood Tschai-

kowsky, and (let 'em all come!) a repulsive little titbit of Grieg.

Back in the lodgings, at least the consolation of Vivian's refraining from an elaborate condolence, but hell to bear all the same; her tragic, downright tactlessness.

'I've *never* suffered so much! It was agony. When I knew you'd gone wrong and forgotten—it isn't as if you'd ever done it before . . . and when it *mattered* so! It's one of the easiest bits . . . it's monstrous, and they won't even know you've never forgotten before. I'd like to slit their throats, slowly. . . .' And Vivian, flaring out of the room, upstairs to a sleepless night.

CHAPTER VII

THE schoolchildren liked her well. Evading the romanticism of Miss Head, she forged instinctively towards humorous common sense and a decency of outlook starkly sexless, a mental tendency which college days had done much to foster. Reasons for a good, standardized behaviour were given promptly, the mistake of lapses explained instead of deplored.

'I don't know what punishment to give you, Vicky. I shall have to think it over.'

'You looked over Flora's book because you weren't thinking, not because you're bad, Joyce. Cheating never answers, because it makes people mistrust you, and then you've lost your credit with the world and haven't anything to draw on.' They responded to dispassion where a thousand scenes would have availed nothing. It was reassuring to Lettys and Susans to know that, inside, they were really good. . . .

'Helen, your hair is awful! Don't run into disorder-marks for stupid things like that, and for mercy's sake don't try to be the Little Madcap of the School, like a Mrs. Meade girl. I'll let you off this time if you go and get tidy *now*, but next time—bang! like that.'

'No, my child, it's no use kissing me because you hit Vicky. You don't kiss people because you're afraid of being punished, you know. No, listen! If you must hit each other,

don't hit each other on the nose or ears—noses bleed if hit *here*—and as for ears, you may harm people for life, Mildred. That means that you gradually won't be able to hear the demon in the pantomime. There's a thing called a drum. . . .' And the history lesson drifted imperceptibly into a roughly accurate physiological affair. 'And you'd better leave off crying, Vicky, because although you and the demon are *perfectly* all right, you richly deserved a slap. And now about these Henry people. . . . Henry the Fifth's hair? What colour? Don't ask me, my child. But I promise to find out before next lesson—no I won't promise, but I'll try hard.'

But there was little for her here, set round with these nice, clean, middle-class children. The nearest approach to real conflict came over the history lessons, and Vivian, loop of yellow hair over one eye, gesticulating over thin bread and butter to the headmistress, defended herself with an intensity distasteful to Miss Langham.

'Miss Garson—yes, do sit down and we'll have just a little chat till tea is ready.' And then it began: the rumour, staff-circulated with shocked, apologetic titter, that Miss Garson had explained, upon inquiry, what a mistress was to the elder girls. Yes, Nell Gwyn . . . or Mrs. Fitzherbert.

Miss Langham took the splendid hue that the rumour was incredible—and invited Miss Garson alone to tea to clear herself.

'Miss Langham! They've a right to know. I mean, they'll be wives and probably mothers themselves one day, and what is the real difference between being a wife or mistress, when you get down to brass tacks?'

Miss Langham closed her eyes. She was never herself among brass tacks.

'I mean—that there *is* no difference, except the church ceremony.' But to Miss Langham, to all the Miss Langhams, you did not sleep with a man; you married him and had dear little babies, which wasn't at all the same thing. She gamely clutched at authority.

'Miss Garson, what have you told them, exactly?'

'Nothing, exactly. But how can one make them understand if they don't remotely know what—what a mis—'

Look here, Miss Langham; Vicky Dene thought it meant that Nell Gwyn taught Charles dancing (as though that would be necessary!). Why, when he was exiled in Holland, he and Monmouth were taught the most heavenly *Bransles* and *Contredanses* by Lucy Walter——'

No good. Also unfortunate. Lucy Walter and Monmouth . . . and Miss Langham's face was looking pure harlot and bastard and not remotely *Bransle*. Vivian's lips unconsciously pursed in a whistle. Dolmetsch had once given a harpsichord recital in Howdlie. The lilt of it . . . like a very polite but obstinate argument between Monmouth in a peruke and Nell in brocade, wearing shoes 'in the French cut.'

'—and when I said that it meant that Nell lived with Charles, she asked how could anybody live with a bed-chamber, or a wardrobe? You see, there are so many sorts of these damned mistresses——'

'Miss Garson!'

'I *am* so sorry.'

With another effort Miss Langham made a good end.

'My dear girl, in future the children are to be told *nothing* outside of the textbook, and if they ask unpleasant questions in class, give them a mark.'

Arms flung high, fists deriding high heaven, Vivian ran to the staff room.

CHAPTER VIII

CHANCE brought Amy to Vivian Garson's notice, and Miss Head, down with a chill, dispersing her classes among her colleagues.

To Vivian fell elocution, poetry, also the policing of the afternoon walks. The child's beauty, Vivian supposed, had begun the business, though it soon became the afterthought it should be; going to your head, but never to your heart.

Hater of dolls from the cradle, Vivian had an illogical maternal streak from the day she could walk.

There was the mouse with the marred face, splashed with some acid in a poison drama that had failed. Vivian, armed with irritation and a pail of water. And the moment when

the mouse peeped at her, apparently confident that looks weren't everything. They finished their luncheon together.

There was inevitable, exasperated cultivation of plain-faced humans because of a chivalry which hated God for loading the dice so heavily against them. There was ever a tendency to hobnob with down-and-outs, not only because they were down and out, but for the selfish reason that they were amusingly liable to be more vital than respectables.

They had repaid.

That commissionaire at the Euterpe Hall, long a crony, who tipped the wink about corner seats, and juggled returned tickets for the monthly concerts, and the night he had run to her.

'Miss! If you could help me out a bit? . . . The wife . . . her trouble. Took us unexpected like.' And his eyes begged of the tall, well-developed young lady. Not for Vivian to answer, 'I am only fifteen.' Eagerly she had raced into inferno, quickly, clumsily, following the father of two, his quick and clumsy orders. One felt one's face getting whiter and whiter . . . and the doctor was all but too late, arriving in a welter of monstrosity and little, unexpected occurrences and screams. So, this is what happens? . . . But she had seen, and held and washed the baby; had reeled into Matlock's arms with self-respect intact.

But loving Amy was anybody's game. How easy to be good with a face like that! Rather hating Miss Head and her general staylessness, one was brusque with the child. 'Hullo, old lady, how's the gout this morning?'

There was a winter day when Vivian, uproariously drunk with life, entered the classroom and blew Wordsworth, Tennyson and Co. sky-high: 'We are Seven' (my God!); 'The Mermaid' (my God!); 'The Children's Hospital' (dear Lord!). And pushing her hair about, she recited Swinburne to the docile class.

She saw the opened door perhaps a quarter of a minute too late; a confused grouping of Miss Langham and some man. There was an impression of Vicky Dene calling out, 'Hullo, Dad!'

'Dad' inclined his head. 'How very—delightful.' Another impression of incredulity in his tone; a clearer picture of Miss Langham professionally smiling. Unexpectedly, to herself, Vivian kept her head and conducted the class with promptitude to the burning deck.

In her study the actor was saying to Miss Langham: 'But how wonderful of you to let the children hear things like that!' His hostess stiffened instantly.

'Wonderful.' So, there *was* something wrong about the poem. Swinburne. . . . M'm . . . a popular young man. She herself knew little of the god whose feet, too early, were doomed to turn to Putney clay. She would mention the matter to Miss Garson. Swinburne, perhaps a little advanced. Advanced. Yes, that was probably the word.

'What a beautiful voice she's got. Full of variety. Well—thank you for my visit, Miss Langham. I trust my little wretch . . .' He bowed himself out.

In the hall there was the pealing of some class bell, and Vivian hurrying by with half her hair coming down. Trotting by her side, a child with a flower face. He paused.

'Thank you for the verse.'

Vivian ran her hand through her hair. 'Casabianca is such a witty little poem, isn't it? Don't you love the way they kill off or mentally torture the children in these classics? A shambles! "Smiling, the boy fell dead," and "The May Queen," and "The Lord of the children had heard her, and Emmy had passed away." Even Old Caspar's encumbrance had to find a skull in the back garden instead of a cricket-ball. Are *all* poets childless? I hope I don't die pointing a moral.'

He exploded with suppressed laughter. 'You're in 'disgrace, I believe.'

'Swinburne?'

'Um. . . . Miss Garson, have you ever acted?'

'Oh, the usual thing, you know. *Mice and Men* at amateur shows in Howdlie.'

'Tell me more.'

'You'd 've adored it. We didn't run to limelight, so one of

our men—Jimmy Marsh—rigged up a magic lantern contraption in the back of the hall and turned it full on to us. It took about three minutes for our faces to get really on the move. The Œdipus effect about the eyes must have been very striking. Most of my eyebrows ended the night on my chin——’

‘Then you could have played Act Three of Sardou’s *Diplomacy*.’

‘Hah!’

‘Were you good?’

‘Yes.’

‘How d’you know?’

‘People that mattered thought so. Besides, my voice, you know. Those notes in it carry.’

Slightly repelled, he secretly agreed.

‘Of course, my face was wrong for the part. It’s too changeable. You want a very pretty immobility for *ingénue*, and I’m only interesting if the light’s dead right, and plain if it isn’t. Look!’ She moved to the window. ‘You see? Flat. Now!’ And she stood under a gas-jet.

She was right. The wavering shadows brought out a vitality, a delicacy of outline suppressive of too flaring nostrils and crooked eyes.

‘Quite. Your face needs conditions.’

She agreed. ‘Never the same, is it? That’s why people are apt not to recognize me in the street. My own father cut me once in a tram because I was wearing a new hat.’

‘Well, well, well . . . and who’s the incredible child?’

‘Amy Bowker. Isn’t it amazing? And would you believe it, she’s the most unimaginative little toad in the class, except for her memory and her arithmetic. . . .’

‘With those eyes!’

‘I know. The Lord was being extra inscrutable that morning, wasn’t he? Well, I must shepherd my rabbits to the cloak-room.’

‘Is there to be another Christmas play this year?’

She cocked a humorous eye. ‘Certainly. Proceeds to go to a charity that Mademoiselle Daudet calls “Ze Whiff an Strey.”’

'You running it?'

'Yes, heaven help me.'

'Can I push Vicky into line for you?'

'Oh, she's not at all bad, I'm told. How should she be?'

He liked the direct, young-manly way Miss Garson paid a compliment.

'And little Amy?'

'She'll get a very tiny part. She can't act, you know.'

'We don't let trifles like that worry us in the profession.'

His grin was sub-acid.

'Oh, but I hear we pride ourselves on our productions, Mr. Dene. *We* play before parents and the headmistress. For Whiffs.'

'Ever thought of going on the stage?'

'Lord, no! I should hate it.'

'Why?'

'Oh, beastly people without ideas, you know. Meals at unnatural hours, parts one didn't like . . .'

She was gone. He turned away. How she could annoy one! To saturation point. And how difficult a person from whom to tear oneself away!

CHAPTER IX

THERE was just time, between a committee meeting about the Christmas play and the preparation of report forms, to fit in Miss Garson and Swinburne. Miss Garson, summoned, was not at her happiest. She was tired with term-end, the extra classes, worried about her father, between whom and actual want she sometimes glimpsed that she would have to stand. Already, at fifty-four, he was on inusical piece-work. His nerve was going; he had lost his self-respect, whole-heartedly and dramatically. And Miss Langham was burbling about trifles. Vivian also discovered, as she listened civilly, that the way that Mr. Dene's hair grew was disturbing. And hated the heavy oval of Miss Langham's face. And there was a painted tambourine on the wall, and a chenille spider half-way up the curtain.

'It is a sin against the Holy Ghost,' said Miss Garson aloud, gazing.

Miss Langham closed her eyes. 'That is a very unnecessarily strong way to put it, my dear. But I'm glad that you realise that that—ah—type of poem—'

'I'm so sorry. I was thinking of—um—bad art.'

'Quite. And though some people admire this type of poem . . . putting ideas into their heads. . . '

The latter words smote Vivian to a dawning interest. Sunday evenings in the Howdlic house, and father, Jimmy Hobson, and the rest remodelling the world, making gods, tipping them over. The case for pure English that was only safe in the hands of the peasants, and peasants were dying out in England and buying bicycles and phonographs; how much of the Bible to 'take' literally; the fascination of words. What was the origin of Pall Mall? And Piccadilly? And Pimlico? The oldest theatre in London? The Rotunda in Blackfriars Road? Were we the Lost Tribe, and if not, why not? And why did Jews run a'l pawnshops and Frenchmen gravitate to chequers and dress designing, and Poles to remodelling fur coats, and Italians to ice cream? And was Frith's 'The Railway Station' a great picture or bad photographic stuff, and would Kate Perugini repeat her success next year at the Grosvenor Galleries? And why mayn't one say 'serviette'? Why leave verbal sanity to the lower classes? Never use a French word if it has an English equivalent . . . don't be a purist, Hobson . . . there's a fug in this room. Father. Can I open the window? Have you got the use of your arms and legs? What d'you mean? Of course I have. Then don't ask superfluous questions. You mean, May I open the window? . . . Supper, and getting back on father who unguardedly offered to cut the cheese in half . . . you can't cut one thing into one. You mean into halves. Don't ask impossible questions. Laughter.

'But isn't that what one's here for, Miss Langham? To put ideas into their heads, I mean.'

'Not that sort of idea, Miss Garson.'

Vivian chivalrously stayed her hand. Miss Langham, in common with the bulk of parents, probably didn't know

what she did mean, but only knew she didn't like it, and was only absolutely sure about the fact that she was determined not to have it.

'And now, here is a copy of the play. See that Miss Head and the other mistresses have one too, please. You had better take the little girls through it this afternoon. "Pixikin," Amy Bowker; "Dreamdust Man," Joyce Billings; "Maysie," Victoria Dene; "Buttercup," "Cobweb," "Fairy Sleepybell," and so on,' read Miss Langham irritably.

Miss Garson read the play at the midday break and murmured, 'Gawd.'

There was a periodic eruption called Brownie-man who addressed Maysie as 'Mortal.' There was a songlet in which 'elf' was rhymed with 'yourself.' There was a braggadocio little boy who shouted his disbelief in fairies, and a reproving Fairy Queen who threatened to shut him in a hazel nut. There were dances and curtseying to a rose-bush. There were cries of 'Oh, how beautiful!' and the information that the rainbow was really a see-saw upside down. There were flower fairies who cried, 'What a merry jest!' And there was a nurse who declared that Miss Maysie had dreamed it all.

There was the day when the children knew their words, and Vivian, to enliven the walk, conducted a rehearsal of the crocodile as it filed along Streatham Common. There were turnings of heads from passers-by and nurses with charges at the strangeness of school conversation.

'Dear Queen Rose-bush, I shall always believe in you!' Vicky Dene would shout from the rear.

'A harebell is *my* home,' announced the fat girl in spectacles from the middle of the procession.

'*"I swing upon a catkin—"* Oh, Miss Garson, *do* look at that dog. He's just tripped up on his chin!

'Never mind the dog, Joyce. "A catkin," "a catkin"—go on.'

'*"I ride upon a bumble-bee,"*' shrieked a voice in the van.

'Vicky, don't laugh so loudly,' Miss Garson hastily sank her own face into her handkerchief.

'Oh, tee hee hee!'

'Now, Amy.'

The little paw tightened in her hand. 'I don't *want* to say what I do.'

'Is it as bad as that, Amy?'

'Tee hee! Kumpfl!'

'Oh, har har har!'

'Children, be *quiet*!'

But it soon appeared that Amy meant business.

'I don't *like* it, Miss Garson.'

'My darling, do leave dramatic criticism to Mr. Clement Scott!' Sweet non-comprehension. But later, as the night drew nearer, as a trickle of staff began to drop in to watch, tears and obstinacy, and Amy dumpily dancing in her strap shoes.

'Amy! You're nine. You're too old to behave like a baby.'

'I don't *want* to say anything.'

Mrs. Bowker and Miss Laugham to consult; tolerant indulgence.

'Then give her little speeches to another fairy, Miss Garson. Just let her come on with the ones who have nothing to say.'

And she came on with nothing to say, and hid behind the biggest girls.

The guest, brought by Dene, was perforce alert and polite to the father about the intelligent performance of his daughter. Vicky moved well—no shyness—clear enunciation—ripping—congrats, old chap. But his eyes were elsewhere, seeking one face among the pushing fairies, resting on Amy, with nothing to say; Amy, stodgily sitting under a branch of green leaves; Amy, speechless, songless, but Amy in lemon-coloured tarlatan, a wreath of linen-drafter's buttercups round her head.

The stranger stirred restlessly. And Amy's childhood ended, at nine years old.

CHAPTER X

CONCEIVABLY, Mrs. Bowker sensed that a child, even your own, possessed of a face like that, had also a predestined track to follow. The conviction of Mr. Yarrow was

overwhelming. A man always knew . . . men made women homes by knowing their jobs . . . and was he not an intimate friend of Mr. Dene, Vicky's father, Amy's schoolmate? And one would somehow—be always 'there,' at the child's elbow. . . . Some Christmas play, she supposed, that Mr. Yarrow wanted Amy for, and that meant a whole year in which to think it over, with Christmas almost here already.

Although forewarned, acquiescent, Mabel Bowker did not know that the school play had piqued her, and that the actual sight of Amy without a line to speak had had its effect. The condolences of the other mothers, their civil astonishments ('I expect they have to be careful about making the little girls jealous') were tiresome. The assurance of Mr. Yarrow was pleasant.

It was on the day that money crept into the discussion that Mrs. Bowker began to look at Amy with new eyes, and was thereafter never able to look at her with the old.

Amy was, after all, to 'start work,' as Mr. Yarrow jovially put it, this Christmas. She was, it seemed, to feel her way, find her feet, her level, get the 'smell' and 'rake' of a stage into her system. Mrs. Bowker come along too? My dear lady, you'll find the place swarming with mothers. . . .

The mother before him stiffened. She had not, mentally, bargained for that. He noted her.

'And I've got some very sharp little kids this year. I think my Bread-and-Butterfly is going to be a find.'

'Your . . . ?'

'Oh, it's a version of *Alice through the Looking-Glass* we're doing. Most of my colleagues can't see farther than *Wonderland*, and, between you and I, Mrs. Bowker, I can't afford panto, this year. Panto's getting too spectacular. What happens? The public goes up by day-excursion to London and sees a Lane show and comes back to Streatham dissatisfied. Not enough spectarkle. Do you know, Mrs. Bowker, that one fairy fountain costs me sixty pounds, and then there's trouble with the Council. Why, between you and I, Mrs. Bowker, what I'm spending on the whole of *The Looking-Glass* wouldn't pay Dan Leno's salary. Or Campbell's.'

'Well I never!'

'Yes. An' I tell you this too: Campbell's never made *me* laugh yet. But he's a London comedian. Mrs. Bowker, there are some comedians up north who're doing village blacksmith engagements—week in week out, you know—who, if they were in their right place, could put these London men in a corner. There's a young man I've met called Will Fyffe—fine Scots stuff, and versatile, too. Pathos *and* laughter. And one of 'em's not even on the halls: working in Tate's sugar factory. Harry somebody. He sometimes does a humorous bit to friends, sticks on a dangling ginger moustache, and he's got the stuff. . . .'

It seemed to the assailed ears of Mrs. Bowker that there was also a young fellow called George Formby not yet come into his own. Lancashire line . . . and what could Yarrow do? They weren't bill-toppers but provincial artists. But let London wait, that's all Yarrow asked.

The news of Amy's engagement flew over the school. The staff was vocally shocked. The staff sitting-room hummed with the incandescent, the saga of the incredible action of Mrs. Bowker.

'She mayn't be what *we* call a lady, but still . . . ' condensed and summed up Miss Head.

Miss Garson shrugged it off, bending again over the *Girl's Own Paper*. But she sleuthed the child to the cloak-room, put on her coat, kept her while the girls clattered up the basement steps.

She was tying the cloth bonnet on Amy's head when her fingers stilled and cupped the little face.

'You little rat! Oh, you poor little rat! What will they do to you? . . . Kiss . . . nere! An' one more on danny. . . .' All the baby-like ways she had kept down in the child's school interest she called back in that moment.

'You will come an' see me, Miss Garson?'

'Of course I will. Listen, ducksypop. I'll be there on the very first evening of all. And look! I'll come round and see you and all the other little girls.'

Trouble in the lovely little face, and a whisper at Vivian's ear.

'Miss Garson, shall I have things to *say*? Shall I be *frightened*?'

Vivian knelt by her, arms round her body. 'Duckydear, I don't know. I don't think so. Listen. Try to be just as you are now—always . . . when—when people lose their tempers . . . remember, they're just really daddies and mummies at home, in spite of what they seem, and say, and do. People with tabby cats in front of the fire, and a turkey at Christmas. . . .'

Interest, at last. 'Do they *all* have tabbies?'

'No,' responded Miss Garson promptly, thankfully. 'Some have black toms with white boots they clean themselves for Sundays. You see, they can't put their boots outside the door. . . .'

And then the maid stood, sniffing in the fog, to fetch the child home.

CHAPTER XI

THE artist-critic in Vivian approved *Through the Looking-Glass*. Steering clear of the spectacular, knowing nothing of the *posé* effects of the 'with curtains' school or the hit-or-missery of symbolism, the settings snatched victory from defeat with the minimum of fuss. An impression of white, with cleverly childish designs sprawling across backcloth and wings.

The prologue showed Alice on a gigantic mantelpiece draped with ball fringe, and the stage darkened as she passed through the mirror, lightening immediately to show her in the garden of live flowers, down the path of which, a prim, aproned figure, she hurried in strapped shoes, ever seeking to pass the daisy, tiger-lilies and rose who promptly took up their bed and walked, bewildering, to form another irresponsible bed that was, by grouping, the one she had left behind . . . ever side-tracked by the apparition of the rocking-horsefly and the bread-and-butterfly, who, their bodies dotted with paint, their wings a shimmer of gauze, their faces

stolid to the last as they lumbered their dance ('How can a piece of bread dance?' 'Dear Miss, have you never heard of the heel of a loaf?') combined in a heavy alliance against the tiny gnat, brown-winged and fluttering. ('Please, why do you spell your name with a G when it's called Nat?' 'Because I'm the first cousin of the rocking-horsefly, and he's a gee-gee.' 'I don't *think*——' 'No. You don't. Always talk before you think. It saves time.')

The snapdragon-fly was a likeable, elderly character in plum-coloured satins. It seemed that, being edible, he was debarred from a job o' work in the garden, between seasons. ('You see, if the slugs got at me I shouldn't be fit for the table, so I have to keep my bed all the year round till December. Haven't you heard of a sluggard? Well . . . that's me.') And he slept in a bower of holly, complaining that Christmas came but once a year.

Then Alice sprang, and the garden dimmed . . . there was the sound of waves and one saw a row of ovoid shapes, sitting attentive at the enormous feet of the Carpenter, while the Walrus, tushed and lymphatic, cut thin bread-and-butter and sliced lemons, as he mournfully eyed the little oysters. Happily, the seashore tragedy was softened, and Alice made to discover that oysters, on opening, could nip right shrewdly on closing, and the active shells, garnished with nonsense pearls, routed the Carpenter while letting the Walrus flop back into the ocean—there being a feeling on Alice's part that he resembled Uncle Herbert, who also possessed whiskers and gave excellent presents at Christmas (which probably went with having whiskers).

The scene in which the sheep served in the shop (item, one egg on shelf) was dwelt upon, and the trickle of Kate Greenaway children coming in to buy would not have overly distressed Carroll. Nor would the enlarging egg, abusing the English language and paying off preposterous words. ('Oh . . . you call yourself heterogeneous, do you? Well—I don't. There's sixpence for you, and I 'opes I don't 'ave to use you for a fortnight. Not bin no manner o' use to me, that's what you never haven't.' 'But, Mr. Dumpty, don't you know Grammar?' 'I did know Grammar once for a bit, but we lost

sight of each other. 'E moved.' 'But, don't you sometimes pass his house?' 'Parse 'is 'ouse? Parse 'is 'ouse? Why should I?')

And ever Alice jumped her squares until she won the heavy crown topped with a golden ball, and stood at the door of her palace, in argument with the green frog gardener. Much was made of the banquet. The pudding had a *passepied* with the mutton until both were 'removed,' on the plea that the mutton was a remove, anyway, and it was while the horrific table manners of the animals reached a climax that the massed candles, by some pyrotechnic device shot up to the flies, and Alice was left alone in a scene vaguely ecclesiastic. Dimly a mantelpiece with ball-fringe loomed . . . quickly she climbed on to it . . . vanished.

But it was, Vivian rather believed, the Red and White Queens who ran away with the honours; who welded the half-dream, half-near-nightmare together, creating with their every appearance an atmosphere of reassuring, worriting domesticity. Actresses of age and experience—one from the valiant Surrey, one from an apprenticeship of twenty years at the Old Brit', at whose famous pantomimes players were still rewarded in kind, where it was a commonplace for a popular Cinderella or even Ugly Sister to receive over the footlights a bundle of blankets, a hamper of food, or a dress-length—the rival queens, irresistibly reminiscent at times of certain passages in *King John*, threw all whimsicality to the dogs, and played the parts with a deathly seriousness that was wholly funny. In exactly the same spirit had they, in their time, attacked *East Lynne*. Elderly, raddled, crowned, shawled and crinoletted, to Vivian they struck the authentic note. And their consorts—hen-pecked, clubless cronies; the White King fatalistically collaborating with the inventive White Knight in one enormous and labour-saving device after another. He, too, brought to the character scraps of a longish repertory from the Bleeding Vic in the Waterloo Road, before Emma Cons appeared to bring semi-refinement and the title of The Victoria Music Hall; to dig into the pit, there to discover trodden shrimps and orange peel to the

depth of one foot, and finally to pave the way for West End visitation and the era of Miss Baylis.

And into what incident, Vivian, passionately attentive, wondered, would Amy be imported? The daisy? An oyster, with three lines and a solo?

But there came the moment of the entry of the White Queen—that dishevelled muddler—leading by the hand her child. 'My Imperial Kitten!'

The adapters had interpreted the maternal ejaculation literally, and Amy was a fluff of white fur, her neck bowed with blue and a little bell, her smoky curls topped with an eared cap and minute diadem.

Vivian subconsciously waited for, heard, the catch in the breath from the audience, their possessive delight as she trotted after a huge cotton-reel the White Knight had patented. ('The Perpetual Kitten-Amuser. Will roll in a quantity of expensive directions. Directions enclosed.')

Consciously, impatiently, Vivian knew that in comparison with the other used children of the stage, Amy was an amateur... no perceptible glimmer of talent. And illogically one's heart warmed to the manager who, his hand in hers, brought her on at the curtain. Smallness? But the oysters, animals, and flowers could produce minuter statures. Cleverness? The Queens... Alice... almost anybody.... Fools! Asses! Yet with what fury one would have borne the leading on of any other child.

At the interval Vivian pushed her way into the street.

CHAPTER XII

CLIMBING the flights of stone stairs, she was suddenly marvelling at the singularly responsible nature of the work engaging these children. To amuse adults at eight, nine, thirteen years old. A tallish order. Yet stage children, from the boy Rosalinds of Shakespeare's day, were by no means unknown, and one had heard of the monster shows of Augustus Harris and of the troupes of juveniles trained by Madame Katti Lanner; up till all hours and a curtain falling

at eleven-thirty. Fresh aspects of the business crowded into one's mind.

Their education? From what class, if not the lowest, were they drawn? But there was the case of Mrs. Bowker? But that was not typical. Pure fluke. . . . And who took the children home at night? What would Amy . . . ?

Vivian ran; flung open the door of number nineteen.

Well . . . after all, it was a singularly familiar scene; one oddly scholastic, in fact. Two long school-feast benches on either side of the long room; a central stand with hooks laden with coats, string bags, mufflers. A little pair of goloshes she recognized. Children in rows on the benches, chattering shrilly, nasally.

'Adenoids,' murmured Miss Carson. The reassuring, accustomed hush at her own entry, and one's astonishment at the resumption of the row. . . . Disorder marks all round. . . .

An oyster, half of its papier mâché shell disposed over the bench, eating an orange. A tiger-lily having its knuckles soaped at a basin streaked with verdigris. A smell of peppermints and gas. A woman's voice: 'Whoever's that? For Gawd's sake shut that door, Miss . . . give us all the pewmonia.' Vivian apologized, sizing her up. One saw her in some front yard, arms akimbo, cloth cap over Hinde's curlers, giving next-door a bit of her mind (a bit of it would probably be ample). She would go to the pub for Saturday night gin, and later use those words one sees chalked up on fences. Then a child's voice crying, and the woman turned sharply.

'Stop that, Florray! Leave off, keep on so!'

'My cyblack's runnin' into my eyes, Mum. It 'urts.'

'Well, don't go rubbin' yer eyes. 'Ere, where's the tarl, y'old bundle o' misery!' The towel was discovered under the bench and the child's eyes wiped, gently enough, Miss Carson observed. But her glance was wandering in search.

'Isn't Mrs. Bowker here? And Amy?' She brusquely addressed the woman.

'They *was* 'ere.' The mother's voice was a blend of resentment and deference.

'I'll wait.'

'That's 'er plice.'

Vivian looked. A corner nearest the window. Not draughty, because it was closed and curtained and farthest from the door. No privacy, though. But the space before the mirror was a small oasis of clean towel, Mrs. Bowker's own silver brush and comb, a doll of Amy's propped up.

Amy's neighbours—two flowers—began to snatch at the silver brush.

'I bet I c'd get as much as three shillun's on these,' said the rose.

'Go on! Wish I c'd swipe 'em. My ole gal swipes all my money, Fridays,' answered the lily, 'only gives me a lousy penny.'

Miss Garson bit her lip. 'Oh, don't use words like that!'

'Why not? I'm *eight*!'

The old difficulty. One language, teacher-language, for the national school, and another for the home as buffers against jeers and cuffs. It was one of the social problems that herself and father, Hobson, and the others thrashed out on Sundays. Vivian paced the room. And Amy's place was between them. Vivian reorganized rapidly. Too many children in the room. Draughts, but no ventilation. Insufficient water supply. Room too high up the building. No place to lie down. Fire! What happened then? The gas-jets were protected only by wire globes, and all this muslin, wool, an 'arlatan hanging up. Uncarpeted boards. Drains. A faint but unmistakable smell in the passages.

In a corner sat a red-haired child, reading. Vivian instinctively gravitated to her, as automatically swept her eyes over the literature. The child—thin legs in scarlet tights drawn up to her chin, lobster-claws sweeping the ground, was distributing her attention between the Bible and *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*.

Profane ejaculations wrestled with Vivian. Lardi Longsox and an Old Testament passage of a denunciatory nature.

'But—why both?' she heard herself say.

The child looked up defensively, then, taking in the speaker's voice, manner, and dress: 'It's Sunday school t'morrow. I've got to learn me bit.'

'I see. M'm. But it's news to me that they wear spangles in the Bible.'

The student also took in the tone, and allowed herself to giggle.

'I love Ally.'

'I can see you do. I wonder why?' No answer. 'Can't you tell?'

'Well . . . I dunno. I like the dresses an' the figures. I'd like a dress an' a figure like that ones's,' the finger was pressed down upon a buxom party clad as a dragon-fly. The wings and design excellent and imaginative, the leer and physique entirely of the earth. Miss Carson tapped the paper.

'Now, look here, childie; these things are well drawn, but they're vulgar. And it's vulgar because it's done to make people snigger. And the difference between a snigger and a giggle is about the difference between Alice and Ally Sloper. You don't know what I mean, but you may, one day. At your age the idiotic things grown-up people say stick in your mind. You think you've forgotten 'em, but you haven't. They're there . . . and that's why it matters—oh, but *abominably!*—to get the right set of idiotic grown-ups' things in first. You never know. They may stand between you and something ugly, one day. Now, about this Bible——'

'I can't understand the blasted thing.'

'Neither can I,' promptly responded Miss Carson, and regretted it a second too late. One's confession was partly true, but instant and sympathetic repartee was the stronger, older instinct. A vision of herself as missionary shot into Vivian's mind: the passionate appeal to cannibals to desist from tribal rites, and the sudden, excellent whiff from the cook-pot . . . oneself hurrying off, tears of earnestness still in eye, to help consume the human head. . . .

She said, 'May I?' and took up the Bible. One thing to be done with it still, when you were simultaneously a free-thinker, a worried, unwilling disbeliever, beauty-lover, God-seeker, scoffer, and hoper against hope for Christ and sanity in the midst of this preposterous blood and thunder.

Miss Carson selected a passage at random and began to read aloud. One's voice. For the glory of the Lord. It was a

pity that the loveliness which can be sound can make the reader cry, when the voice is her own. Vivian, self-impatient, wet-eyed, guessed in that moment that the performer must quell his own emotions lest they destroy him. But it had worked. The child was round-eyed.

'That's fine, Miss.'

'It's only what you were learning and didn't like. Never mind. You've got something out of it. It mayn't be what your schoolmarm wants, but—— And now, suppose you tell me something about'—her eye roved to Amy's corner—'all of you. I see that corner's empty, by the way.'

'That's Baby Bowker's. She's the Kitten.'

'I remember.'

'She's never bin on before. She's a silly. Don't know nothing.'

'It's her first engagement, you know,' burst from Miss Garson.

The child eyed her guardedly, instantly withholding further communication, Vivian saw. A diplomatist, at eleven years old. She answered, 'It's all right. You can say what you like to me.' Silence. Rebuked, restless, Miss Garson wandered into the passage.

CHAPTER XIII

COMING towards her were Mrs. Bowker and Amy trotting at her side.

'Oh, Miss Garson! This is nice of you! I am so glad to see you.' Vivian, her hand already in Amy's, made polite rejoinders to the mother in her rustling silk, spotted veil pushed up over flushed cheek-bones, had time to wonder a little at some informality which had crept into Mrs. Bowker's manner.

'Miss Garson, it's beyond everything! I've been down to this Mr. Yarrow and told him so, right out.'

Vivian, loosing Amy's hand and cocking a confidential eyebrow at Mrs. Bowker, edged Amy towards the dressing-room door, but the other snatched the child back. 'Not in there without *me*, thank you! I said to Mr. Yarrow that I'd con-

sented for the child to be in the play, but I'd never, I told him, imagined for a moment she'd have to mix with children like that. Have you *seen* them, Miss Garson?'

'Yes.'

'Well, then, do you blame me? Miss Garson, goodness only knows where they come from, and, if you'll pardon me mentioning it, but their clothes are dirty!'

She was too excited to lower her voice for what followed. Never had Vivian Garson seen Mrs. Bowker, in her flushed indignation, more nearly like a woman. . . .

'I agree, Mrs. Bowker; oh, but *entirely*! I am so glad you see how impossible it is.'

'Who wouldn't, my dear girl? So I said to this Mr. Yarrow, right out, I said, either she gets another room with the children with parts or the grown-ups, or a room to herself, or I take her away.'

'And——?'

'He was very put out, very. A most unpleasant man. Not at all gentlemanly. But he saw I meant what I said, and he's going to make us a place in the change-room, just off the stage. It's a horrid place, and I shall have to bring goodness only knows what from home *and* a hot-water bottle, and these men all over the place—looking in at the door when I was taking my handkerchief out of my petticoat pocket—well, it isn't nice. Anyway, down we go, don't we, lovey?'

Vivian caught up the child, furry and warm, pressing her cheek against the little face.

'Mrs. Bowker, I am so glad. Oh, what a relief! How clever of you! Listen, if ever you or the maid can't take old Kitten here to the theatre at nights, I'll do it gladly.'

'Oh, you are kind. But no. I'm sure you understand. I must come m'self.'

'Absolutely. I wouldn't let me, if I were you! Wouldn't trust anyone with you, would I, my little pig?'

Vivian pressed the child, set her down and raced along the corridor. Had Mrs. Bowker remembered to bring a bottle of milk and a spirit lamp? She would be sharp enough, one knew at last, on future occasions, but this was a cold even-

ing. Hurray for mothers! That hot-water bottle to be brought from home . . . splendid. But until to-morrow——

‘Excuse me, but where can I get warm milk?’

‘Nowhere, I hope,’ responded the man promptly. ‘Don’t tell me you’re a tottler, my dear lady, because I shan’t believe you—after the Swinburne.’

‘Oh, hullo, Mr. Dene.’

‘Hullo, and how do you do. Now do assure me about the milk.’

‘It’s not for me, bless you!’ said Miss Garson, twinkling.

‘Good. You look more like champagne.’

‘Heavenly! Not that the word isn’t the best part of it. It’s a verra weendy vegstubble in itself. But the milk! The milk!’

‘I’ll take you to the bar, or—mayn’t I fetch it for you? I mean——’

‘Don’t women go in there? I don’t like to worry you.’

‘Oh yes. But they cater more for Ladies, I fear me.’

‘I’d love to see a Lady.’

‘Come on, then.’

The bar was in the dress-circle foyer (unless Miss Garson would prefer to see that allotted to the pit?) Its glass window, scrawled with gilt metal, gave its patrons a view of carpeted steps, the door of a cloak-room, and the central exit from the circle. Holly framed advertisements on the red walls, paper chains criss-crossed the ceiling, and the barmaid, gipsy ear-rings tinkling, was good-naturedly refusing salutations under a mass of mistletoe which depended from the chandelier. Dene led Miss Garson to a settee.

‘You’ll have a spot of port or something?’

‘I didn’t start by wanting anything. I haven’t had anything to drink for years. But—yes. I want to celebrate something.’

‘Don’t apologize!’ He secured drinks and the glass of milk and rejoined her, glancing with casual curiosity and reawakened interest. A most contradictory young woman, with her directness of look and word, boyish fear of being a nuisance, and vital, faulty face . . . fingers of his mind were scratching among grease-paints, rouge, and powder, touching her up, controlling with macassar oil that incurably untidy hair of fine gold—hairpins were cheap. And, having

painted that sensitive mouth, her best feature, because her eyes were too small and crooked at that, one kissed it promptly, inevitably, and 'no offence meant and none taken.' And she would acknowledge it with a puerile chuckle.

'Well, here's wishing you the compliments of the season.'

She roused herself from some dream. 'What? Oh, I see. What do I say, please?' Her hand shielded the glass of milk.

'Now, may I know? Do tell me about the celebration.'

Her eyes shone. 'Oh, it's just that I was being afraid for a child, and I think she's safe.'

The actor looked tactful and pensive. She saw it, and shook.

'She was poor, but she was honest,' murmured Miss Garson. He grinned.

'It's little Amy Bowker. She plays the Imperial Kitten.'

'Oh . . . ah . . . extraordinarily pretty child. But no good.'

'You thought so too?'

'Amateur. I told Yarrow he was making a bloomer putting her among experienced children. But the public ate her up. The point is, will they go on eating?'

'I'm hoping they won't get the chance, Mr. Dene, and I don't think they will. Hence the celebration.'

'Which you aren't celebrating.' He had stopped her as she was absently about to drink the milk. She glanced at her untouched glass of port.

'Nor I am.' And catching it up, downed it at a blow, and put her arms on the table. 'There was a time when I thought (and preached) that children should find their own feet for themselves. I tried to make them self-reliant—of the world—in class. I believed that they must learn to look beastliness in the face early, and avoid the bogey it becomes if it springs on you later—'

'What kind?'

'Oh, street accidents, nits in the hair, lies, bleeding fingers—anything. My father still believes that's the right tack, and acted upon it with me. Now, my mother never did. I'm told she would have kept me in cotton wool. Well, I still think father and I are right, but I see now that the moment emotion comes into it one starts creating exceptions. I honestly

believe Amy is an exception. When I went up into that dressing-room I was deeply interested and amused by every one and everything, until I thought of it for her. And then I was nearly physically sick.'

'Idealizing the child. As for the rooms here, they're not good ones, but not bad as dressing-rooms go. There are rats at Islington . . . eat one's boots while one's on. . . '

She smote the table. 'Tah! Rats! What do they matter? I suppose I can only explain it by saying that Amy is an idea to me. The idea of childhood. Easily marked, and marked for all time—I'm boring you.'

'Never that. But you're not so very old yourself, are you? Children are tough little brutes, you know. Short memories. Impressions by the dozen, sloughed off every day. Vicky wanted to be an acrobat for a week, and had forgotten all about it in three.'

'That's a physical thing. That's easy. It's the mental tolls I'm talking about. Why, Amy has been in this place now for—what?—nearly two hours, and her brain is already changing. It must. She can't come out the same, any more than, in its degree, I shall from talking to you, or you from talking to me. Only we're seasoned, a bit. We know how to clutch at free will and to keep ourselves to ourselves! in spite of the inroads of other people's personalities—and now tell me all about why Amy is no good for the stage.'

'She's a dump.'

'Yes.'

'No natural intelligence.'

'Good!'

'But of course it's early days yet. She may grow enough flair to keep her blouse and skirt together, at it were.'

'Ah, don't say that.'

The neat form of Miss Langham, passing with Miss Head to her place in the dress circle, moved by the window, looked in, nervously preparing to avert her eyes, paused incredulous, then hurried her subordinate forward. A bell whirred. The barmaid swept up tumblers, patted her hair, said 'Happy Christmas, Mr. Parker, to you and all at home,' and 'Ta ta, Billy, old cock.'

Dene rose. 'We'd better be going back if you mean to stick out the show. Well, I do hope we shall meet again, but it won't be for some time, I'm 'fraid. I go north next week for the new Howdlie theatre season. All amoong north, tha' knows.'

Vivian Garson shook her head. 'Not a bit like it. I've lived there, you see, and they talk——' She suddenly huddled her coat round her, and, one hand on hip, fell into a story, spoken slowly, ruminatively.

'There was a lad 'e lived down past Works, an' his wife fell ill. 'Twas a mucky business an' she short-handed, laike. 'E goes to doctor an' doctor says t'give her a black draught. Next mornin' lad come back an' says as 'ow wife be no better an' doctor says didst give black draught? an' lad says, "Well, we don't pley draughts in our fam'ly but ah give her dooble six o' dominoes an' she well-nigh died in night, she did an' all."

'Hah! I adore you!' Laughing, they hurried to their seats.

CHAPTER XIV

THE question was, whether to see Amy before going home? Miss Garson decided that it would tire her, and that Mrs. Bowker must be encouraged from the first to hurry her away as soon as possible every night. At the feeling of a hand on her arm she turned.

'Oh, Miss Langham!'

No answering smile on Miss Langham's face. This was the look (and was probably going to be the voice) that went with Swinburne and Carolean mistresses.

'Miss Garson, I want to have a word with you.'

'Certainly.'

'It is late, and this is the holidays, and to-morrow is Sunday——'

'Couldn't you—er—tell me now what it is?'

'It is hardly the place, and the theatre will soon be shut.'

'Couldn't we go into one of the boxes? The audience will be a few minutes yet getting out, and they're sure to be closing a bit later to-night, after the first performance.' Efficiently,

Miss Garson organized her own downfall. Miss Langham entered a box, said, 'We had better close the door, I think,' stood while Miss Garson closed it, then sat upon a spindle-legged gilt chair.

Ever susceptible to suggestion, resenting the fact, ever succumbing to it, Vivian remained standing. Almost one expected Miss Langham to produce an inkpot from her evening coat and lay it, with pens, along the ledge of the box. The auditorium lights had already been reduced, but the illumination from the central chandelier remained and two incandescents over the conductor's desk. Hollow bumps came from behind the curtain, and a voice from the orchestra said, 'I've lost the third page of number five.'

'Miss Garson, this evening Miss Head and I had seats in the dress circle. During the first interval I found the heat too much and we had a little walk in one of the corridors.'

'I am so sorry. You do look a little tired. Can't I call you a cab?'

'When we were returning to our places, I chanced to glance through a window and saw you—— Miss Garson, I am sorry even to suggest it, but you seemed to be drinking with a man.'

'I had a glass of port with Vicky's father.'

'Didn't it occur to you what you were doing? What it looked like?'

'He was Vicky's father, Miss Langham——'

'Does that make an excuse? One of my junior mistresses in a public saloon with the father of one of my pupils!'

'Well, I see what you mean. But really, Miss Langham, that was all that happened.'

'Do you realize that to-night the theatre was full of our girls and their parents? If I saw you . . . What possessed you to do such a thing?'

'I went in to get a glass of milk for Amy. My hat! And I never gave it to her,' murmured Miss Garson, in parenthesis. 'Miss Langham, I'm awfully sorry, but we were talking——'

'Obviously.'

'——about, oh, free will and education——'

'Please, Miss Garson. Now this, I am afraid, means some

changes. The harm is done, you must see that. You shall have your quarter's notice, of course.'

'You mean——?'

'I am sorry, Miss Garson. There is much in your work that has been satisfactory, even excellent. I have been pleased with the way you have worked with the staff and avoided bringing disagreements and trifling difficulties to me on any provocation. The girls—the children particularly—seem fond of you. But there is, as you know, a lot that I disapprove in your methods, and after what has happened——'

'I can't afford to be out of work, Miss Langham.'

'Could you not have thought of that before?'

Score to Miss Langham. Why did one furnish cues to people that provided them with admirable ripostes?

'I should have preferred to pay you your salary and ask you to resign at once, but that would make the very talk I am anxious to avoid. You had better remain and be looking about for another post. You are very young, Miss Garson. Twenty, isn't it? I will say all I can for you——'

At this point the curtain slowly rose, revealing Alice's mantelpiece stacked end-on against the animals' dining-table. There was, upstage, an impression of 'Auld Lang Syne' sung in ragged unison, and across the stage hurried the Red Queen, a Paisley shawl slung over her stage robes, and a string bag, from which depended a goose, clutched in one hand.

'That knitting must be round,' shouted the Red Queen, and vanished into the darkness.

Miss Langham dealt superbly with the unseemly episode.

'—it should secure you other work.'

'Miss Langham, I can't stand this, you know. I see your point, but you're only seeing it as a complete picture. What, take it to pieces, is morally wrong about what I did? The bar? The port? Or Mr. Dene? Suppose the bar was the Guards' tent at Ascot. Even my mother had champagne there with men friends. Do you imagine that I've never had wine before? At my age? I've got a better head than my own father! As for talking to Mr. Dene, haven't we all, at school?' Even as she said the words she was aware of the disastrous

nature of the arguments she was urging. A way one's arguments had. Turning and biting one.

'Ladies don't go into those places, Miss Garson.' Miss Langham cleared her throat. 'If you don't see it that way, you show me more plainly than ever that we must part.'

Vivian shrugged. One had argued, such as it was, not to justify conduct, but quite simply for rent and clothing, and the piano-tuner's fees. A little, perhaps, to educate Miss Langham. But the woman was a schoolmistress and no longer capable of learning. She taught.

The lights went out all over the house.

Luckily, one hadn't lost temper over the notice question, or said anything transpontine and irrevocable. That three months' breather might be going to save the situation, failing anything else. Oh, to be able to present ultimatums!

It was cold. How very wonderful if Miss Langham was locked into the theatre by mistake for the night. But God was never quite as funny as that. Very chancy sense of humour, God had. And a monotonous habit of putting all the best cards into other people's hands. 'There, my dear Vivian Garson. There's *your* temperament in plain envelope—and not an ace in the pack.'

Down the road a band of carol singers were still pipingly at work.

'They looked up and saw a star. . . .'

CHAPTER XV

ON CHRISTMAS morning Vivian Garson ran downstairs put her arms round her father's shoulders, kissed him heartily, and said, 'Bless you, old chap. By the way, I'm a fallen woman,' just as the Salvation Army silver band formed a circle outside in the road and struck up a slow and dismal tune rendered with windy emotion. The Garsons recognized in it an annual item never played nor sung at any church, but only in the holiday streets, by the Salvation Army. There was a certain fascination in having no idea what the thing was called. It would take all glamour away to ask the box-rattling

sisters. The Garsons alluded to the melody as 'Salvation.' Julian would sing his version of what the words were:

The dawn breaks clear,
Salvation is here,
Oh, *twa*, *twa twa-twa twa tar!*

And he would shake his head in a solemn ecstasy of redemption, and chuckle with real appreciation before dropping the florin he couldn't afford into the slit.

'Oh, *twa*——

What's that, my dear?'

'Fallen woman. *Me*. I'm a dipsomaniac and a betrayer of other people's fathers.'

He knew that tone. Vivian was always jaunty when perturbed or hurt. When she had delivered her story, he said, 'This Langham woman . . . you can't expect to get a pint pot into a quart jug—or whatever the saying is I'm feeling after!'

'My good man! You're not going to tell me I was wrong?'

'Well, you know, I'm afraid I am. She doesn't want ethics but conventions. She was quite unconsciously going for you because of a suspected tendency in you, rather than for what you were doing. Very few people think clearly.'

'Well, anyway, I've got the sack.'

He was silent, then, saying only after a slight interval, 'Ah, that *is* something definite, isn't it? Well . . . we must get along as best we can.'

The band, its intermissions punctuated with double knocks on neighbouring front doors, was now into its stride again with 'O come, all ye faithful.' Julian roused.

'*Why* is it those chaps make the most cheerful music miserable? Hark at that! A funeral, not a birth!' He seized the butter-knife and rushed to the window, flinging it open and rapping like a conductor upon the sill.

'Gentlemen, please!' Some of the instrumentalists looked up, cheeks puffed. The majority, hardened to upthrown windows, played on. An elderly man detached himself, holding up his box.

'A happy Christmas, sir. Gord bless you.'

'Thanks, the same to you, but couldn't you get your good fellows there to phrase this carol better?'

'It's for the glow of the Lord, friend.'

'Entirely so, but couldn't we make a greater glory by giving Him a more perfect version? Now, your attack—do forgive me, but I'm a musician. What *we* want is a *pæan*. "O come, all ye faithful" (what's the next line?) "Joyful and triumphant." Now, your men are *apologizing* for our Lord. Here you have a handful of simple peasants telling each other something tremendous. Have you heard? The Christ Child is born! Let's run and pass on the news to the neighbours. And the gossips run, gathering forces as they go. *That's* the picture we want. Your interpretation is all on one note. Like an uninterested person telling you the weather's holding up. No climax. No nothing. Music's only a form of speech, you know, and dramatic elocution's phrasing. Ever been to the August Manns concerts at the Crystal Palace? He overdoes it to get his effects over a huge space, of course, but he'll show you what I mean. Now, shall we try again?'

He tapped the sill. The bandsmen, obedient to the raised arm of the captain, ceased, and started afresh. The effort was wonderfully as before. Julian said, 'Thank you. Tah!' and drew in his head.

Except for the relief of nonconformity, the holidays promised little. Vivian saw that when you live in furnished rooms, housekeeping is reduced to the minimum; when money is tight variety is difficult to come by. She divided her time between Julian, the theatre dressing-room, and those concerts to which father and daughter had free admission.

The theatre was first to go by the board. She saw herself that the child must not be over-excited. But she had satisfied herself that a certain rudimentary comfort had crept into the small, boarded cubicle in which Amy was dressed and undressed. Mrs. Bowker had procured an oil stove. The hot-water bottle. . . . Vivian herself had contributed a length of bright cretonne for the shelf-like dressing-table, a hint she had picked up from the open door of the room occupied by the Queens. The rest of time was filled in renovating her own

wardrobe, and an episode in which she asked Amy to tea, an invitation regretfully refused on mauve paper, by Mrs. Bowker.

Well, it was a guarantee that the child was securely guarded... getting enough sleep... but father had composed a Doll's Symphony for Amy that must have pleased anyone. He was to have played it after the tea, which was to have included hundreds and thousands sprinkled on the bread and butter. He had become so interested in the score that he had lost a commission over it for copying the first violin part of the Kreutzer Sonata.

The theatre passages were mournful, shorn of one's *raison d'être* for being in them, social contacts uneasy to establish. That lobster? Had she said her Old Testament 'bit' nicely? Where, and how, did 'Florry' live? Impossible to go upstairs and see for oneself. One wasn't a district visitor. Organized good works had always gone against the grain.

Vivian Garson bent again to her application for an English mistress-ship of a school in the next county. 'Must be Church of England.' Why? If one didn't obtrude one's private doubts upon the governors, could they not, in their turn, let sleeping dogs lie? Why wasn't it possible to write: 'I have an open mind. I adore the idea of Christ, but church-going is unnecessary to me.' Not that it mattered. One was paying ceremony too much of a compliment by this truculent rebellion. But until authority allowed its teachers mental honesty, it could not expect them to pass on mental honesty to the next generation. Far be it from Vivian to rob the smallest baby of its God. One's attitude was, rather, fiercely protective. 'Don't be too disappointed if your funny little prayers aren't answered instantly, in the Aladdin's lamp manner. Why aren't they? My dear, that's the boulder that the princes of the Church have been stubbing their toes against all down the ages, and they've made the pain all the worse for themselves by insisting that God *is* an actual being, a Father of infinite indulgence from whom favours can be coaxed. So the Bishops and the Popes and the what-nots try to climb over and scramble round that boulder by telling you that, evi-

dently, your ignored petition was an unworthy one, and that was why your mother died in agony of cancer and the sun went in upon your birthday picnic. So accept it, my poor little babes, and don't let it hurt you too much. Be brave about the whole baffling muddle.' Courage. That was the lesson that probably mattered most.

CHAPTER XVI

THE Easter term was wearing. The impetus of Christmas past, there was a lessening of interest and much variation in the average of health. The spring weather was, by turns, enervating and bitter, sending now gusts of sleet, now drying winds and thin sunlight that brought crow's feet round tired eyes. 'My skin feels like a second-hand misfit,' announced Miss Garson to Miss Head.

'It is trying, isn't it?' Miss Head hesitated. 'Miss Garson, I so hope it isn't true that you're leaving us?'

Vivian nodded.

'I am so grieved. I know what you have done for the girls—it's what I've tried to do, but you've gone at it . . . I don't know . . . more boldly. Certainly more successfully.'

Vivian's eyes brimmed. 'You *are* a good sort. I wish we'd seen more of each other. Confound this weather! It's making my eyes run.' She mopped her wet face, turned impulsively. 'The fact is, I took it for granted you were a sort of policeman for Miss Langham.'

Constance Head stiffened, the cordiality faded from her face.

'That was a rather extraordinary thing to imagine, was it not?'

Days passed, and not a sight of Amy. In the cloak-room Vivian's eye wandered to the empty hook—third from the end—as she stood on duty. She made cautious inquiries. Miss Within 'rather thought' the child wasn't returning this term because of her theatre work. Madness. Didn't Miss Garson think so? Just at an age when school was so vitally important. Wax to receive and marble to retain. . . . Meanwhile,

there was something forbidden going on on the staircase. Pardon *her*.

See-saw criticism of Mrs. Bowker struggled with personal loss. The term was drawing to a close. Restless, apprehensive on this and other counts, Vivian Garson continued her work, giving uneven lessons because torn between the considerations that the next-comer would lay waste her tilled field and a passionate determination to leave her children armed, protected as never before.

The application for the new post was unsuccessful. Too young . . . not enough experience. Miss Garson gave a short laugh. Also, it was three weeks to term end.

There arose a rumour that Amy, the Alice play now concluded, was to go north, to Howdlie, to appear in a melodrama. Vivian visited Mrs. Bowker to have it confirmed, to say good-bye to the child.

Eating thin bread and butter in the over-crowded drawing-room, she skirted the subject. Oh yes, it was quite true. The school? Well, it was a pity and was worrying Mr. Bowker quite a lot, but one can't be in two places at once, can one? And then, the child mustn't get over-tired, and of course there was the contract with Mr. Yarrow. Go with Amy? Well, of course. My husband, Mr. Bowker, Miss Garson. Miss Garson is Amy's teacher, Herbert.

Vivian, her hand in his, took in his immediate future. Meals prepared by the maid; the nursemaid dismissed. A club? Almost certainly a Masonic meeting every now and then. She held her tongue with an effort, kissed Amy briefly under parental eyes, and left the house.

CHAPTER XVII

THAT night, quite suddenly, quite dispassionately, she wrote to Hamish Dene. It was conceivable that final engagements had not yet been made even now at the New Arts Theatre. Or there were dismissals, and that she might, through him, secure some dramatic bottle-washer's post in the company. The money couldn't be lower than at the school, and she could combine companionship with Julian with

being near Amy, if only for a few weeks. Her father's chances of securing odd jobs might be increased by return to familiar ground, and Matlock would tell them of cheap rooms. Mentally she forbade the commissionaire to be dead. He must have kept alive! It was the least he could do after all Miss Garson had done for him!

Julian Garson was submissive about the plan. It might even be pleasant to be back in the town, though what he called 'the old gang,' Jimmy Marsh, Hobson, and the others, had dispersed by now, come south to make, he hoped, a better job of their lives than he had of his.

Dene's answer—on a postcard—arrived within the week. 'Quite an idea. Better come at once. Just off to rehearsal, in great haste.'

The Garsons gave notice and began to pack. Julian's methods with trunks were still in force. His music scores and manuscripts carefully disposed, he would say, 'I've broken the back of the thing at last,' and it ended in Vivian folding his personal effects and packing them all. ('My dear, you can't afford to have your trouser-knees look impecunious. And don't—oh, God!—put your shaving cream in the crown of your hat. When *will* you realize—you do such *whimsical* things, and it's not your line of country a bit.') Deliberately she gibed. That road slackness lay. 'Whimsicality,' Julian had said himself, 'was terrible as an army with banar'

For the last time she tapped upon Miss Langham's study door.

'... I am indeed sorry that you failed over that post, Miss Garson.'

'Oh, that's all right. You know, I'm going to Howdlie to join the new repertory company there.' Score. At last!

Miss Langham's silence said everything for her. 'I hope you will be happy in your new work.'

'I wonder? ... Oh, thank you!'

By a tremendous effort Vivian controlled her tongue and kept the news from her class. This new work was not the impression of herself she meant to leave with the girls ... quite sincerely—doubts blown to the winds—Vivian could have prayed with and for them. But for some reason one

didn't do these things. Scripture was on Tuesdays. Eleven-thirty to twelve. Miss Miller. Vivian's offering was of another nature; a standing in the cloak-room—facetious, casual, affectionate—rallying them all.

CHAPTER XVIII

HAMISH DENE was punctual for rehearsal; everybody was, at the New Arts Theatre. Team work and mutual courtesies were taken for granted by the company, which numbered among its directors a naturalized Baroness of German origin, who trumpeted her adopted tongue through her nose with fluency, and would not, her numerous friends agreed, master its idioms this side of the grave—an Oxford don, a professor of Greek, and an eminent English novelist.

The theatre, in a side street of the town, had begun existence as a cattle-market. Cleared and gutted, it was a meeting-house of Friends for two years, and later a hall where classes in bicycling were held. Local dramatic critics now leant against the still existent rail, jotting points and 'a good opening sentence' where once the wheeled novices had clung and squealed.

In 1898 came the Baroness von Lippmann, widowed and wealthy, depressed by her loneliness in London, seeking in Howdlie a more compact field of interest, and one slightly more reminiscent of her dear and loved little Strelitz, that happy townlet of gossip and art. Taking a large Gothic villa on the outskirts of Howdlie, she doggedly subscribed to every local charity that caught her capricious sympathy. Reasonably soon she saw that her position as titled foreign novelty must be maintained by other methods. Besides, one liked Howdlie.

'Ah, dearee,' she would boom to her intimates over her admirable coffee, 'in London I was in a bull like a china shop, an' an' an' de smoke an' de noise I have niffer smalt de like annywhere. Niffer.'

In a year the Baroness's shrewd eyes had spied the bleakness of town life, the shoddy, provincial imitations of London's art, the struggling local talent, ingrained yet lacking

centralization. It was Manchester, a Mr. James Marsh had said, without the prestige or the protective self-satisfaction of that city. About the musical life of Howdlie the Baroness made no move. Her husband had encouraged and promoted countless festivals and concerts in Strelitz, but the Baroness's loathing of him and of the marriage of convenience had automatically caused her to loathe music as well. She loved music, but it would have been a disloyalty to a good hatred to do other than abandon it utterly upon taking up life with Karl, or to fail to continue to detest it after his death. About pictures she knew nothing and cared less, and presented a new wing to the art gallery in Plimsoll Street because a pavement artist had a beard that reminded her of that of the burgomaster in Strelitz. She conscientiously attended every private view, and periodically tore up dozens of complimentary seats for the Bach concerts she longed to hear. ('Ho! It does not matteurr. Dey will not mass me!')

The town, gravitating to money and assurance of any description, learned to turn to the Gothic villa with its Bavarian gnomes in coloured pottery on the lawn. Noise was very comforting, and the Baroness could always be counted on to blare a criticism, and to stand by it, right or wrong. The clergy, the artists, the mayor and his lady, even the visiting judge of assize, soon learnt what ailed them all; soon learnt the futility of being tactful and courteous about Germany and 'the menace,' soon learnt that the Baroness was more British than themselves and considerably more so than Queen Victoria, who, in strict confidence, said the Baroness, was, 'Between you an' me an' de bad-post, as Tscherman as they're made, eh?' But when Her Majesty died, no mourning was heavier than that of the Baroness von Lippmann, who, lowering her voice and tucking her small chin into her neck, would say: 'It hes been a ferry great blow to us Anglische.'

The town accepted, liked, and laughed at the fervent, loyal little creature with her mosquito face and absolute humourlessness. It respected her mental alertness which refused to allow herself to be exploited. It slowly learnt that only through personal emotion could the Baroness be goaded

to action or thought. Fury at an income-tax assessment form had even caused her to imagine, for an hour, that there might be something to be said for the women's suffrage question. And although she had lost her tussle with the law in the shape of scolding letters to the associate and clerk, the mayor and town councillors, in regard to the ventilation of the Court, whither she had doggedly bent her steps to hear a case tried, and from whence she emerged with a splitting headache and in a civic rage, it was to Howdlic's ultimate gain that, at a visit paid to the old Grand Theatre, the door of the Baroness's box should possess a defective lock, which caused a bitter draught ending in neuralgia, and that the coffee was undrinkable. Therefore, the drama was going to the dogs, and the Baroness gave certain dinners at her villa which ended in the formation of a board, and the acquiring of the cyclists' hall, and paved the way for an intelligent stock company at last.

The Grand and its melodrama of *The Ladder of Life*, with its persecuted nurse who was placed (big scene) under the great Nasmyth hammer and rescued by a descending chain of acrobatic sailors, had enthralled the Baroness—but it had kept her in pain with her little jaws for three days. Therefore it was time we English had something else. Anything would do. She gave no trouble to the board, or selection committee; her money had made the new venture possible, therefore it was all perfect, all 'ferree nice.'

A little skirmish arose over the confident expectation that a box emblazoned with 'L.' and a crest should be accorded her in perpetuity. Believe her, the Grand Duke had *his* arms on *his* box in Strelitz. But her good nature asserted itself, and one of the artist-workmen-actors was quickly able to reduce the flush upon her cheekbones by asking earnest advice about the design for the decoration of an O.P. flat.

The theatre was reasonably, traditionally uncomfortable, the dressing-room accommodation awful. Even the Baroness's bank balance had quailed before the prospect of purchasing the four tenements and one public-house for demolition that alone would have secured the necessary rearward space. The affectations of the say-it-with-curtains

school had not yet dawned; young Mr. Gordon Craig, still experimenting in London with his mother's productions, not yet driven to the Continent, was also not yet an influence, and some eight years were still to pass before the British theatre would see its model arise for all time in Oxford Street to the pattern of Mr. Gordon Selfridge, so that by 1930 all new London play-houses in lighting and architecture resembled the artistic drapery department and the show window, and one looked involuntarily through the proscenium arch for specimen streamers of *crêpe de Chine*.

The little New Arts Theatre was, and looked, a theatre, and the Baroness had no need to trumpet her convictions about red velvet and gilding. The posters were three-colour affairs, and not precious pages in difficult type. They were, indeed, own brothers to those two-by-one strips employed by the touring *Hearts are Trumps* company in 1900, so convenient to lay across the sweets in village shops. . . .

Hamish Dene went in by the public entrance, pushed his way through the stalls gangway, cursed the dimness, apologized for dropping his stick, saw they were on Act One, and sank into a seat whose springs said 'Bilk.' He muttered 'Has my wig come?' to the stage-manager, then, 'I say, Bruce, about Miss Garson. Can we do anything for her?'

'She's coming up to see me to-day. (Mrs. Appleby, we *must* have your chair moved! Can't see your face at the dressing-table. So sorry. All right . . . that's better. *You are partial Snake.*) Yes. She comes at twelve-fifteen.'

Appointments were appointments at the New Arts, and no nonsense of forgetting times and names and dates and subject matter. The Howdlians left that sort of thing to London. Bruce turned a page.

'We've nothing immediate to offer her, I'm afraid,' he whispered.

Dene shifted and wondered. It would have been amusing to have Miss Garson with them. A beautiful mouth. Good fun, too. Given fortuitous circumstances one would have kissed her in plenty of plays . . . that medieval bosh, *Broken Hearts* . . . no, nothing there; but there was the daughter in

The Lyons Mail . . . heaps of things. Oh, well . . . she might have changed her mind by now.

CHAPTER XIX

THE interview between Bruce and Vivian Garson drew to its conclusion. Vivian, hating the trait in herself by which nervousness and anxiety conspired to make her abject, verbally unfortunate, over-susceptible to tones of voice that sketched dismissal, was already on her feet while the manager still sat at his desk. Fear of the future would come later. Meanwhile, one hung about ineffectively, seeking the parting phrase.

Back in the lodgings the rock-bottom statement of courteous talk and no immediate employment reached through much interesting conversation. Julian, a little uncertain of rejoinder, listened passive, humble. He was more used to rebuff.

'Well, old gentleman, it looks as if we'd have to go back to Streatham.'

He said cautiously, 'You'd like that?' She was reckless with apprehension and irritability.

'But, of course, I loathe Howdlie. Who wouldn't?'

Weeks of this kind of thing. And, just as father and daughter had decided another move south was beyond their means, came a letter from Mrs. Bowker. She knew that Miss Garson would be glad to hear that, after all, she and Amy weren't to come north. Mr. Yarrow had sent another child and was keeping Amy for a town play. Mr. Yarrow even thought it might get a chance in the West End, later, so after all it seemed for the best. . . .

Miss Garson clutched the tinted paper, stamped round the sitting-room. 'Fool! Damn her! She doesn't even say if the child is well, or happy. That's a mother for you, Mr. Garson! She doesn't even—all she thinks of—after everything—she doesn't even write grammatically!' Ten minutes of this, then the lanky figure, spent, in a chair.

She packed quickly for herself and Julian. No more vagueness. The cab was at the door, the landlady at the head of

the kitchen stairs, when the postman came up the steps. Garson? A note from the theatre offering Miss Garson small parts and general understudy. Vivian pushed the yellow loop from her forehead, cocked a crooked eye.

‘Well, Father?’

‘But—the cab . . . I mean . . . the rooms . . .’

‘Toss you stay or leave.’

‘Well—ll.’

‘Heads, we go.’

Tails lay uppermost in her palm.

CHAPTER XX

IN JUSTICE to the child, Mrs. Bowker admitted that Amy seldom gave trouble. There were little scenes, of course—easily dealt with—growing easier to manage as Mabel herself grew in theatre craft.

There had been much to learn for both of them, the child’s mother realized. Practical, increasingly vigorous, Mabel Bowker coped with facts, unheeding of the point at which she herself became a totally different personality.

Some fighting instinct, smothered in safe suburbanism, had leapt to life in the dressing-rooms of the Streatham theatre, and it was said that the little Imperial Kitten was now guarded by a highly imperious cat. It was quite simple. You looked about to see what the best of the juvenile actresses were accorded by the management and then demanded it as well for Amy. If difficulties were raised, you weighed up the look in the managerial eye, rapidly estimated his attitude to threat, the possibility of counter-threat, and either modified your demand (thus gaining something in any case) or bluffed, contract or no contract, and won the day outright. Later, you learnt that what the other children were receiving did not necessarily constitute all that could be wrested, and you increased your demands—cancelling clauses and screwing up prices. There were many other theatrical mothers upon whom Mrs. Bowker sharpened her wisdom teeth; women who were always boasting—lying, if it came to that—about their children. Lying (one learnt the lie look)

about compliments paid, about contracts; lying, above all, about salaries offered and received. Mabel Bowker would not open fire with these tactics, but in time she kept the lie up her sleeve. . . .

The affront of her daughter's accommodation in *Alice* had begun the campaign. In the light of wider experience she saw that she had bested Yarrow with an astonishing ease that was to prove by no means typical. Yarrow was, of course, small fry; on the make. Flustered. She knew, if she ever gave the matter a thought in these strenuous years, that Yarrow had capitulated before an assault unpremeditated, amateurish, maternal—one that Mabel could now never re-create. The purely outraged mother cannot live in such an angry sea. Future tussles were entirely sophisticated. The initial fight for Amy's comfort had roused, in turn, jealousy, rivalry, which in its turn roused ambition.

Herbert Bowker was no trouble either—he and the boys got along quite nicely. And, when Amy was a few years older, it would free one to go back and live with Herbert and the boys as one had before. One hoped the maids were behaving themselves and keeping the house nicely. One was even able to stay with the family at times if Amy wasn't on tour. But you couldn't really take hold in odd weeks. One did the best one could, advised Herbert by letter about new girls and their duties, and told him that if he was really coming to Amy's new show, he *must* buy a new evening-dress suit. And get a new silk topper. It wouldn't do the child any good if. . .

Mrs. Bowker paused, pen in hand. Children in the theatre occupied a peculiar position, especially in straight plays or melodramas. Surrounded entirely by adults, noticed by everybody, their only privacy was the dressing-room, conceded without question. Even the *ingénue* was not expected to dress with Little Willy or Little Lord Fauntleroy.

There, within four walls (and not always then if they were boards, and flimsy), the juvenile actress could be what was left of herself when outside claims were satisfied. Here Amy's habitual silence was apt to stand her in good stead, for it took her mother several months to realize and campaign

against the raised voice, the tactless remark. And you could never be sure next to whom you were dressing. Thin partitions had produced explosions before now, which had been known to end in dismissal.

The plays which possessed a child interest meant a rôle of sweetness and pathos. These qualities it was desirable to carry with you off the stage, lest the public be disillusioned and the managerial and leading woman's friends, invited behind, be antagonized or annoyed. Also, there was learning and teaching who was important in the theatre, and who was not; whom it was safe to rebuff with a pretty, childish smile, and who must be accepted, whatever the offer. This depended in some measure upon these people's power to make things unpleasant through influence. The stage-door man was always to be placated—in little Amy Bowker's case by proffered chocolates given by her admirers—lest he hold back letters and messages, or by items of prattle about the new doll handed over the footlights, lest he 'mislay' first-night telegrams or refuse one's own friends admittance. Good tips weren't always enough, and adults were no use in these cases; the doorman was proof against *them*. Above all, there were the great comedians to deal with when the child was Girl Babe or Red Riding Hood at Christmas, and Amy was getting almost to the age when kisses were no longer tribute to infancy. Thirteen already. And that might be going to be awkward for the child's career, especially if she took to growing too fast and became all knees, like that wretched little Maisie Tootell, the Boy Babe, who did a speciality wooden-mat dance in the palace scene and looked such a miserable shrimp in her blue satin court suit that they'd had letters from the front about her. And Maisie had taken to drink. At twelve years old. No mother, Mabel Bowker had heard. A nagging aunt, who liked her bottle and sent the child for it, at ten, eleven o'clock, to the public-house. Mrs. Bowker was horrified to remember that Maisie and Amy had shared a room at the Diadem, Clapham; curled, rouged, socked, their blue suits matching, they had sat, eaten, talked together. One had sometimes even envied Maisie's liveliness while pitying her scarecrow legs. One was

glad to remember that one had disapproved of the way the girl darted into the comedian's quarters—and at the time she stayed there. And wondered that she was never taken home, but slipped out alone, her tartan wool tam-o'-shanter pulled on to the lustreless hair which tongs had already dulled.

That last night. No mistake about Maisie that evening, and Mabel Bowker thanked her stars and the manager's that the Boy Babe's peculiarity had not been betrayed earlier in the run. It was said that Maisie had learnt her limit, and how far it was safe to go when in work.

Mrs. Bowker examined her pen. The Maisie pantomime was two years ago. Amy's mother, suddenly and for the first time, wondered what Maisie had talked to her child about? One was often out of the room.

You couldn't ask your child how much she knew. You had to wait for her to come out with something awful—and then it was too late. Aspects of education presented themselves to Mabel Bowker. But, the child was all right? Never said much at any time.

Meanwhile great comedians came and went, and if it wasn't an outing offered to Amy it would probably have been a kiss from somebody else, or sitting on bill-topping knees and being called 'My little sweetheart' and 'My best girl.' Amy always put up her face very prettily, and had been taught to pick a bit of her bouquet and run with it to the footlights for the conductor, who could cut your encores if he was put out about anything.

CHAPTER XXI

MRS. BOWKER was a busy woman. At eleven to twelve-thirty—a walk for Amy. Twelve-thirty to lunch-time—a rest, lying flat. An eye to be kept on the boxes of chocolates, the contents rationed. Care of the child's skin and hair. No tongs. Luckily it was curly. Her diet: plain roast and boiled, only it must be well cooked—a stipulation almost impossible

to fulfil in provincial rooms. Her wardrobe: rehearsal and street suits that must never be played or romped in.

Amy was used to this. At the theatre, particularly during the pantomime season, one had to stand or lean against furniture during waits. If one sat, tights wrinkled at the knee.

Letters to answer on behalf of Amy, also business decisions to be made, friendships to encourage or nip in the bud. That Miss Garson. Nice girl, but need she write to the child quite so often? Miss Garson's letters were always answered, either by Mabel Bowker or, under her supervision, by Amy herself, but they were kept brief; the answers were things you could mentally put at the bottom of the pile.

At the theatre only could Mabel Bowker cede authority and relax for a few hours, when producer and stage-manager took charge of Amy. The little girl had never given the smallest anxiety to anybody over the memorizing of her lines, and, as with the majority of children, her excellent memory embraced the rôles of the rest of the cast, so that whoever was holding the prompt book felt safe to tiptoe out for a smoke when the child was anywhere about.

'“The—the lips of no other man——” What's it, someone? Amy!'

'“—shall touch this mouth whilst you are gone, Angus,”' recited Amy politely.

'Thanks.'

'“Oh, Myrtle, Myrtle, while in my lone veld rambles, I——' Confound and damn. Amy!'

'“—have held you in my arms in thought.”'

'What?'

'“Have held you in my arms in thought,” cross left,' shrilled Amy. And then it was time for her own bit.

A door to open, wait while you counted three to yourself, walk down-stage, and four lines. Take doll off sofa (L.C.), turn, one more line, run out of door, closing it. These doors were lath and canvas, and bent and flapped and swung open when they shouldn't. But they served those tricks on every one, so it didn't matter. Much like in that cut-down version of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* one had toured with. Lace collar and one's own hair curled on one's shoulders. Enter, pause,

business with dog, a lot to say to Harold Bertram, who was, it seemed, one's grandfather, and whose white wig showed the join. Amy had never read *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. It occurred to nobody to lend her the book. One didn't know what went on in some of the scenes one wasn't in. There were bits one had never even seen rehearsed. When one wasn't wanted, it was a walk, or lying down. The stage was often chilly and knicker-suits draughty to one's legs, gleaming marbly with wet-white and powder. But Mamma or dresser was waiting in the wings with woollen dressing-gown or overcoat. There were dressing-slippers to be put on, strap shoes to be taken off before the stairs might be climbed. One missed fun with all that, and chasing Mr. Bertram along the passage, or running with the dog. The dog was about the only person one wasn't encouraged to kiss.

But as Amy grew, Mrs. Bowker lengthened the list of human detrimentals. These now included the baggage man and the advance manager. It did not occur to her that a habit, an induced outlook, might persist. She was, at the moment, worried over Amy's lost chance of playing a part in London. A matter of awkward dates. Mabel had missed the opportunity by a fortnight. She was not yet resigned to, prepared for, these hazards, even now. Somehow, when she had decided that Amy be allowed to become a sort of public child, she had not bargained for all that went with the condition. Too late to draw back now, with one's pride (and the child's record) at stake; with (her anger and exasperation intermittently mounting) a home lost and regular education gone by the board. There was the consolation of fact: that London offered no continuous work for juveniles.

Sometimes—never before the child—she succumbed to uneasy depression, in which she suspected that it was perfectly possible to have Amy's name on the bills for eight, nine, ten months of the year without the child being a real star to the general public. In these moods Mabel Bowker would cautiously approach the other mothers; but airy, patronizing optimism was their line, and lies in plenty. Evasions about reasons for dismissal (a better offer), for non-success at an audition (jealousy . . . the child too refined for

the part . . . too short . . . too tall). Out of an engagement (doctor's orders).

Ten years later Mabel would have reaped her reward, would have seen the dawn of the child-actor as potential star and not as merely pawn in the theatric game, and Iris Hawkins coming into her own in Mr. Pinero's *His House in Order* and *Preserving Mr. Panmure*, ere she married and retired from the stage, known to the last; would have marked the rise of little Bobby Andrews to juvenile lead; the small sensation that was golden-haired Elsie Craven, who, in *Pinkie and the Fairies*, became Elsie and *premiere danseuse* at ten years old, led before the curtain by Sir Herbert Tree; passing without pause to dance scenas on the halls, partnered by black-haired Bert Clerc; giving her testimonial to Gamba on the photograph that hung on the staircase. 'I love dancing in the shoes you made for me,' in childish round-hand. And Renée Mayer of Drury Lane, tiny, silver-voiced, a name for years to London.

I'm just a roving, elfin fairy boy,
I want no title but—the children's joy.

And, to judge by the applause, she was it.

Vera le Fleining, versatile variety artist at seven, imitator of Lily Elsie in *The Humming Bird*. Mattie Block, who owed her chance to M. Maeterlinck and *The Blue Bird*. Phyllis Dare, playing lead in *The Catch of the Season* at fifteen, and never after looking back. Dorothy Frostick, Will-o'-the Wisp in *Bluebell in Fairyland* at about the same age, a shimmer of metallic blues as she toe-danced and paved the way for the Russian ballet. Little, demure Stephanie Bell (who later chose to be known as Stephens). Little Mary Glynne, always sure of good parts, whether in *The Golden Land of Fairy-Tales* or as *Lady Noggs* at the Comedy Theatre, who was to become a Terry-in-law and end in management. Cora Goffin, that tiny dancer, who was to become a principal boy in 1933. And 'Little June' and her dance scenas with Joan Goode. June—Lady Inverclyde. Dark-locked Odette Goimbault, playing in serious stuff at thirteen or fourteen, finding the British public

unable either to spell or pronounce her name (a tendency to 'Gumboil'), and becoming Mary Odette, a well-known film actress.

But—Amy. If Amy stopped now, would it get into the papers? The child had been interviewed, but it was in the provincial Press. Fate chose to spare Mabel Bowker the era that was to dawn.

Meanwhile, the second and final week of the engagement would drive her and Amy up to Howdlie. A horrid town, she had heard. And almost a number two. Very cold, probably. Amy would need a specially warm wardrobe.

CHAPTER XXII

HAVING beaten their way through some of the lesser-known and more outspoken of Shakespeare's plays, the New Arts company was ploughing a Sheridan furrow once more, and *The Critic* was in rehearsal. The town's interest in the theatre made of first nights appreciative affairs that carpers might call family, and this had led to the provision of stronger meat; the my-Godding of drama had blazed the trail for the pure and traditional bawdry of Shakespeare and Congreve, which, in its turn, was to witness the birth of realism in the modern manner. *The Critic* was a stopgap while the directors planned the next move.

'Miss Garson! I *think* if we heard a little less abstract discussion from you it would be all to the good.'

Tilburina wrenched herself from an argument about divorce with Leslie Appleyard, the prompter, hurried forward, apologized abjectly in her deepest tones. The fatal habit of life-interest had tripped her up before now, as had her carrying voice—invaluable in its right place—while her intense amusement over everything and everybody, and open testimony to it, had nearly harmed her once or twice. 'It is a pity,' the *Howdlie Sentinel* had once remarked, 'that the sense of humour of Miss Vivian Garson cannot be relegated by her to more suitable spheres.' This, when a new scene-shifter, as yet unversed in the sacredness of his job, had

dropped a ham sandwich from the flies upon the diadem of the King of Denmark.

“Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet——” Oh, ha, ha, ha! Oh, ha, ha, ha, ha!’

The sandwich had become impaled upon one of the brass serrations.

‘Well, Garson, you *have* torn it this time,’ the Dane remarked, as he hurried to his dressing-room.

The house had laughed with her in purest enjoyment, in civic partisanship, in recognition of her past achievements with the company. The directors were deeply annoyed, particularly the professor of Greek, and excepting the Baroness, who was not present, and who, when told of the incident, fastened characteristically upon the non-essential aspect of the story. ‘Oh, yass? But I do not tank a hem sanwich is enough for de man’s supper.’

Years ago, Vivian Garson had become Vyvyan. She said it was more effective in the programme and didn’t look so soulful. Life was good, but hard. The tiny salary, the endless parts, the occasional extra calls on the purse for adjuncts to costume the wardrobe couldn’t supply, were all borne by the company, but the other women were either living in comfortable homes, had earning husbands in the theatre or in business, and in no case had a father to support. The lean living kept one sub-standard. One kept going on will and nerves. Three pounds a week was the highest figure one touched; that, and the ghost of a kudos. The theatre was already spoken of in London for its interesting, earnest, enthusiastic productions.

Those weeks of waiting to be taken into the company had undermined one’s vitality. The bad rooms, awful food, unappetizing and indigestible. The indecency of seeing your father lack . . . the never-forgotten moment when he ran short of tobacco and they mustn’t afford a fresh two ounces.

People told Vyvyan Garson that the impression of that tobacco had permeated her work. The comment warmed her heart. A pity that one needed reassurance so much. Just as, when one loved, the spoken guarantee must be ever renewed lest it become the the-thing-no-longer-true, though given

yesterday. It kept one humble, but oh, the high moments! For those one planned and endured and lost flesh.

It was probably another pity that actors were so attractive when one was so superficially susceptible; but that was fun, too. Somehow, one found it extraordinarily difficult to regard oneself as an actress, except in so far as the sheer work on the stage was concerned. One's real self would always be with books, movements, poetry, mental attainment; to representatives of other and more creative arts one would ever instinctively gravitate.

It was, James Marsh would say in after years, all of a piece with that hopelessness that was Garson's career. 'If she'd been a real leading lady she could have carried all that intellectual stuff and got off with it. But as things were. . . .'

'But why on earth, Jimmy? She *was* a leading lady in London.' The submarine commander who had loved Vyvyan Garson beat the air with his cigar.

James Marsh regarded him. 'She played lead in London theatres, which isn't at all the same thing, Mr. Hepburn, though it could have been. . . . How did she strike you?' The lay angle, though exasperating and nearly always wrong, was apt to be suggestive.

'Well . . . I see what you mean. I suppose she *was* a bit over-engined for her beam,' pondered the naval man.

'But—what a *dear* she was,' the boy just down from Oxford said shyly.

The theatrical agent muttered inimically.

'A most interesting woman. Fine mind. But fanatical,' asserted the barrister.

'She's been wonderfully good to us,' put in the bursar of the children's hospital.

'Oh, the clothes off her back! But her tactlessness . . . her tongue! And obstinate!' wailed the veteran actress.

The minor poet said nothing. *Moonstones*, 'To V. G.' had long been forgotten. What use in all this talk? Many sidelights don't make a sun.

And many sidelights do not make a sun.

No . . . too ambiguous without its context. They had drawn close over *Moonstones*, Vyvyan reading the verses in the beautiful voice, her eyes wet. Vyvyan dissecting them, unerringly, on impulse, to his best friend, who passed on the criticism. They had drawn apart over *Moonstones*. But one understood better now and forgave.

'I tell you, if *I'd* had the handling of her from the start . . .'
cut in James Marsh.

It always came back to that, and guests would civilly murmur, and rise.

CHAPTER XXIII

VYVYAN GARSON, holding the prompt book (anybody's duty in emergency), intermittently tweaked and ruffled the hair of young Terry Bevan as she chaffed, lectured, and argued. The prompt corner was draughty. Once more Vyvyan remembered too late the overcoat upstairs. This time it was owing to the boy, newly joined, diffident, humorous, appreciative, her best audience, half-way in love with her, who had begged that he might talk to her and sleuthed her like a dog. The women of the company smiled and tutted, saw that Vyvyan had no fixed idea of the havoc she was capable of creating. At times the schoolmarm, the playfellow, the fellow-artist, the protective mother, the despairer of cherished delusions and vanities, the male crony of the moment would depart, dazed, with Garson's kiss upon his forehead.

If the first night had been unusually stimulating, Miss Garson would let out her approval of the world in the lath and plaster cubicle she shared with two other women.

'Ah will arppeal oonto the Powp,' she would suddenly shout, in the accents of the current Catherine.

'Look out, Garson. She dresses two doors along!'

And two doors along, Margaret Anderson, the current Catherine, bit her lips, too proud to fight, and wondering for the first time if she ought to take some elocution lessons. One was a Howdlian, and if *that* was how it sounded. . . .

The voice of Miss Garson was again heard in the land.

'Wasn't Bill too lamb-like? I adore him, but oh, God! why are his legs like parsnips?'

Parsnips. . . . The wife of Bill arrested her movement towards the face-towel. That was *exactly* what they were like. A second later anger enveloped her. It was that Garson woman who had run out at night, hatless and painted, into the rain, in the interval, to get one some cough mixture and thermogene wool. She explained that she heard one coughing and noticed one wasn't up to the mark. The management had fined Miss Garson for the breach of rule. Miss Garson had exploded. ('But Mr. Bruce, the woman was *ill*!') She had, the wife of Bill angrily remembered, fled down the passage, arms flung high.

'It's inhuman! It isn't the money'—Hamish Dene's acclimatized arms were already round her—'it's the principle of the thing, Hamish.'

'I'm sure it is, my dear. But what seems to be the matter? Has some inexperienced person been trying to seduce you? If so, I'm sorry for him, and wish him better luck than mine.'

'Hah!'

'Your hair is a mare's nest, Garson.' He replaced four pins.

'Hamish Dene, you look ravishing in that wig. Oh, what a bad lot I could have been in the eighteenth century!'

The thermogene wool and the mixture had been comforting, the ex-Lady Sneerwell angrily recollected, and had certainly arrested the symptoms.

Vyvyan shivered slightly and whispered to the boy to share his dressing-gown with her. One really must remember things like overcoats, but there was such a lot going on always. And one's particular men remembered a wrap for one probably quite often enough. They would have remembered it oftener if Miss Garson had been the magnetic woman for longer together. . . . you don't dance attendance on a reformer, or protect a highly efficient critic. . . .

The cast was well under way. Long since, Vyvyan had learnt the art of prompting. You ran your eye down ten lines, saw that they didn't seem to be drying, and then you had eight lines for private conversation. The last two lines must

be used against emergency, and that jarring pause that meant a loss of memory, a pause that one's ear, in time, distinguished from the pause which merely indicated emotion or stage business. Then you launched them on another batch of eight lines.

From her corner she and the boy could see the Baroness in her box, sitting wizened, attentive, her pug upon her lap.

'I do not caerr to hev de dawg at home. I would not leave ham to de servants all de time for love of money,' muttered Miss Garson through her nose. The boy exploded. Miss Garson, wrapped cocoon-like in half his dressing-gown, sharply hushed him. The noise had thrown Hamish Dene off his balance. He hesitated.

'"Good Lord, I'm so sorry your parents say they favour the match!"' exclaimed Miss Garson, apologizing and prompting in one breath. The manager, crouching into the end dress-circle seat, so close that he could have touched the Baroness, saw the blunt outline of the pug's face, muttered, 'Curse all lap-dogs,' and followed the fall of the curtain as the dog's mistress turned her eye in his direction. They had had words before over the admittance of Totty. The beast had attended a morning rehearsal, and a cleaner had discovered that the dog had what she bafflingly described as 'forgotten himself' against the satin paper of the von Lippmann box, and hastened to report the calamity. Mr. Sprott had tactfully introduced the question, but the Baroness, when angry, was either noisy or bone obstinate. And anyway . . . as a director. . . .

CHAPTER XXIV

THE first act was over by eight-forty-five, and Vyvyan Garson sauntered to her dressing-room, an arm round Bevan's neck. He hesitated, fervently kissed an untidy loop of yellow hair. The fun went instantly from her face.

'Terry, not that nonsense, my dear. How old are you?'

'Me? I—I'm going to be nineteen.'

'Bless you! And I'm going on for twenty-six. And I shan't wear well. These rather classic blondes don't, you know. You

are a darling thing. I'd love to tuck you up and give you a kiss. My dear, you're awfully attractive. Don't kiss too many girls for fun, because one day one of them will think you mean business, and get a pain in her silly heart. Nere! Lecture over.' She kissed his cheek. Male youth was extraordinarily moving, could even disturb the woman in one . . . but one didn't touch boys, or the husbands of one's friends, or the lovers of one's acquaintance.

The cubicle was lit. Two visitors—three—were crowded into the space. Vyvyan halted politely, then with incredulous joy ran forward, seized a little girl in her arms, stooped, cheek to cheek, rocking her.

'Why, Amy! My little rabbit!'

The woman in satin and flowered toque was pestering the air with formal explanation. 'We remembered you were playing here, Miss Garson, and ventured to look you up. Amy opens at the Empire, Monday.' A kid-gloved hand was extended.

'Mrs. Bowker, this is wonderful of you! But of *course*. Now, do sit.'

'And may I introduce Ivy? Miss Ivy Marks.' Absently Miss Garson took the hand of the infant.

'Sit you down, childie.'

Mrs. Bowker added with a shade of haste, 'Ivy is the daughter of the Empire's manager.'

'Ah,' Miss Garson was absently benevolent, 'and would the daughter of the Empire's manager like a chocolate?'

No smile on the face of the five-year-old. 'Thanks, though goodness knows I have dined. These are quite good, aren't they? Cadbury's. Somehow, one is given a lot of those.'

Miss Garson burst into laughter, lifting the brat high.

'You midget!' Then, to the baby's reflection in the glass: 'Why, here's a stranger! Who's that, Ivy?'

'Why, me, of course, my dear,' retorted Ivy. 'Put me down, please. So-so. Quite rough play! And now I must fly. I must go and quack to Mr. Sprott.' The little creature nodded, and trotted out. Mrs. Bowker hesitated and followed.

Vyvyan said: 'Do you have to see much of it? Of Ninetta Crummles, I mean?'

'Her name is Ivy, Miss Garson.'

'Oh, darling, let's forget the little beast.' She was running her eyes over Amy. Tall, up to one's shoulder. Well made, no awkward age there; the adorable roundness and bloom gone from her face, of course, and the lovely profile a shade more set, the expression less animated than ever. And, as ever, she seemed to be unaware of her looks, or, aware, unable to enjoy them. Beautifully dressed in satin coat, fluted and flared, with black kid boots to the knee. A matching muff, the sole indications of the stage child. But who wanted Amy to be an Ivy? All the same, one was vaguely perturbed. Perhaps it was the manner, adult, sure, and indifferent, with which the girl occupied the room; the look round, assessing the fittings and accommodation as one long familiarized, then indifference again. . . .

'Amy, pet, are you happy?' Vyvyan cast the query like a bomb before her. That governess in Henry James's story, *The Turn of the Screw* . . . she too had tried to batter through psychic defences. . . .

'Yes, thank you, Miss Garson.'

No good.

'Amy, old lady, don't you think it's about time you called me Vyvyan?'

'Thank you very much, Vyvyan.'

She asked the child about her work, received an accurate list of dates, towns, title of plays, rôles acted.

'Well, you're quite a famous old lady, now, I suppose?'

The girl seemed, for the first time, at a loss. 'I—don't know. Mamma will tell you'

This seemed to be modesty, all right. But still Vyvyan was baffled.

'I wish you'd recite to me, Amy.'

'I don't do much of that; I have never had to. But I could do you the death scene from *Four Angels Round My Bed*. "Four Angels Round My Bed, Act Three.—Mother, mother, you aren't really ill? They say I am, my dearest child. They say I have been a wicked woman, oh, never believe them! The truth must prevail. Indeed, indeed I will not believe them, darling mother. Oh, mother dear, who are those figures at

your head? What figures, darling? It is very dark, the shadows creep upon me. Dark? It is light! Their faces shine like the sun. See, mother, one is bending over you. Oh, oh, what can it be? It is forgiveness and it is the end," said Amy Bowker.

Vyvyan bit her lip. 'Thank you, pet. You always had a marvellous memory, hadn't you?'

The recital had filled the doorway. At least the child's experience had taught her to make her voice carry.

'Oh, mother, mother, what's this?' asked Hamish Dene, then took in Amy, and stared. A look Vyvyan had learnt to know from men, from Hamish.

Amy came forward, smiling now, Vyvyan observed. (Was it that that one had missed?) The child's hand was already offered to the actor. 'Mr. Dene? I was in front, you know. How splendid you were! I am so much looking forward to Act Two.' And Hamish, Miss Garson observed, had stopped being facetious. . . . Vyvyan's look and his clashed.

Vyvyan reddened to her eyes. She remembered now that the Bowker party had come to see herself, had been waiting in the cubicle while the curtain fell. Had not, in point of fact, seen the show at all. She opened her mouth, then closed it in the nick of time. You don't betray people you love. Amy had no doubt remembered Dene's face. He was in evening dress as family friend in a modern play—but the make-up made the tribute safe. It would have served the child right if Dene had been family butler. . . .

So, men only had one look for female things whatever the degree of feeling behind it? One had, then, got it all wrong. All these years.

'And how is Vicky?'

The father of Vicky responded adequately, his interest momentarily blurred, Miss Garson sourly perceived. His eye seemed to mock her. She also saw that he had no gleam of recognition of Amy. He was speaking to her.

'I don't know very many very young ladies on the stage. Do let's have a bite together some morning that isn't Wednesday or Saturday, and let's tell each other what we think about it all.'

Vyvyan gripped the edge of a chair, heard herself say:

'You can't expect Mrs. Bowker to say "Yes" to that. Amy is working, to begin with—'

'Oh, Miss Gar—Vyvyan, I often go out with gentlemen. But I'm not quite sure...' The girl turned to Dene. 'You know how it is.'

And then Mrs. Bowker came in. Instantly, Vyvyan noticed, Amy turned over the situation to her mother. The answer to Hamish Dene had been a time-marking, a watching brief.

Mrs. Bowker looked, without seeming to, at the actor, thanked him. She was thinking: 'Not in our company; not (apparently) even lead in his own. And it's our last week in the provinces anyway.'

She said: 'Now that *is* nice of Mr. Dene, and I only wish we were free, but we've got a change in the company, Mr. Dene, and that means extra rehearsals, you know. Dear me, what a disappointment.' And, as an afterthought, there was a look in this fellow's eye that one didn't altogether like. Quite easily might get above and beyond, like that Baron in *Cinderella*, or the heavy in *East Lynne* who'd made Amy cry.... Mabel had never quite got to the bottom of that episode, she remembered. She hoped it was just a kiss that Amy hadn't wanted to give. Amy was only eleven-and-a-half then, and children were often silly. She extended her hand to Miss Carson, to the actor, told her daughter to give Miss Garson a nice kiss—such very old friends—and left.

CHAPTER XXV

VYVYAN drummed with a hare's foot.

'Hamish... when next you come into my room without an invitation would you mind not giving invitations to my friends?'

'Eh? What you mean? That child?'

'That child.'

'Aren't you rather—nervy, this evening, Garson?'

'Oh, for mercy's sake don't call me Garson!'

'You've answered to it all these years.' True.

'I don't get you about this kid. What's the taboo?'

'She's only fourteen, to begin with.'

'Quite so,' he scored.

'Do you usually invite fourteen-year-olds to lunch?' Vyvyan was trying to be careful.

'I don't know many. But, my dear Vyvyan—I mean—the kid's only a kid to me——'

'The father of a young, growing girl,' she parodied bitterly. Do you really want a child with your lunch? If so, I can produce a specimen called Ivy, as precocious as you could wish. Only five or six and quite the little harlot——'

His make-up was concealing. Tanned-faced, he scanned her under blued lids.

'Aren't you being rather impossible altogether?'

'That child—that child——'

'You carry on as though she was your own.'

'My God, I wish she were!' Vyvyan's fist rose, clenched and shaking, a gesture he recognized, but had never, so far, seen in private life.

'You'll get it in the neck one day, Vyvyan, my dear——'

The casual thump on the door which warned of the second act registered punctually upon his ear. He had plenty more to say, would have spared her less, were it not for their ancient affection, dating from her first fortnight in the company. But thumps were thumps, and he hurried out. And Garson wasn't so badly wrong, damn her. He would have been to the kid exactly what the kid would have allowed. Or suggested by her manner. Even the fatherly business had its incidental privileges. But with that old Bowker mother-piece, what in Hades was Garson grouching about?

The elder of Vyvyan's room-mates, Myra Raine, pushed open the door, stood incredulous.

'Garson! They're into the second act. Aren't you holding the book? Valpy's dried up once, and, when he saw nobody prompting he dried up again.'

Vyvyan rose blearily. 'Coming.'

'Feeling rotten?'

'Hating everything. Wish I could get out of all this.'

Myra, one hand on her arm, hastily condoled, but firmly hurried Vyvyan to her post, shoved the book on to her lap,

pointing hurriedly to the place. One hoped that nobody else had heard the last remark of Garson's. People, Myra knew, hadn't overmuch time in which to divine their fellows, and were dreadfully prone to take them literally. One loved Garson, so one never took her literally, but, as it were, struck an average. Garson would always be adored or detested. One had nursed her where one could, and a nervous job it was. One's own credit with the company had helped. One was universally liked, in a mild way that was all of a piece with the 'useful' actress that one was; the kind that would never starve and never get anywhere. Myra Raine shifted the tea-tray from hip to hands and walked on to the stage to lay tea for the family friend. Dene was sulky this evening, she saw. Commonly, her entry with the tray would cause him to murmur under his breath some unauthorized facetiousness. 'Ah, here comes the Mazawattee,' or 'Lockhart's wha' hae.' To-night he muttered 'Damn the women,' as he poured the coloured water into his cup. She unprecedentedly murmured 'And you,' and the slightly Russian flavour of the exchange—an inversion of the St. Petersburg greetings on Easter morning—very nearly made her smile.

Vyvyan put on her hat, secured it with two long pins, caught up her bag, and turned to Myra Raine.

'Ready? Oh, by the way, I've got the sack.'

'You're not serious?'

'Oh no, my dear. Full of unaffected fun. Yes. This very night. Saturday night. You see? They couldn't wait till Monday—after nearly six years. . . .'

'Garson!'

'Sweet isn't it? Oh, how I love the stage, how I dote on it!'

Myra cut through all that. 'Look here . . . can anything be done? Shall I get Dene to speak to Sprott, or Bruce?'

'On no account. Leaving our Hamish is the one bright light in a naughty world.'

'But—I thought——' Myra shut her mouth quickly.

'Because he used to kiss me, you mean? I see. Yes. I suppose one shouldn't have done that. It must have looked bad.'

Vyvyan was already lashing herself into an indignation five years out of date, her friend resignedly perceived. 'But I never knew Mrs. Dene, you know.'

'What difference——?'

'Oh, *everything*.'

'Well, never mind her. The thing is, what to do now? What did Bruce say?' Even as Myra asked the question her hand was on Vyvyan's mouth. 'Yes, but in a *whisper*, Vyvyan.' Vyvyan rubbed her mouth free.

'He said, my dear, among other things, that my frivolity was becoming a damned nuisance.'

'No, that I'm sure he never did.'

'Oh, well, words to that effect. Always the little gentleman. Frivolity...' She wiped her brimming eyes while Myra hastily powdered her own nose. 'Then there was the prompt business, and talking to Terry—oh, quite a rogue's gallery of exhibits.'

Myra was thinking how like Garson it was to be so utterly obtuse, socially, so over-sensitized in her work and conversation. Bruce had had his disturbed eye on Miss Garson for months, Myra knew. And Garson was not important in the company. No buffer-husband, no paternal money, not a good dresser. . . . Her high-water mark in parts, so far, had been Tilburina. But her own appreciation of her humour—and she had agonized even the old crusteds with strangled laughter—had ended in a bad Press notice, which Bruce inevitably read.

'Garson . . . what about the Baroness? She likes you.'

'*Does* she?'

'Well, she's paid you compliments enough, and she's a decent little body, and she needn't have said anything.'

'I can't go to her, my dear.'

'And why?'

'I've laughed at her, made fun of her and her face and her awful house and accent.'

'My dear soul! When your livelihood is at stake——!'

'I know. But it's impossible. To go cadging favours after that. I'd rather starve.'

'Hush! Well, if you won't ask her, I will. Garson, I never

knew anyone with such a talent for standing in her own light as you have.'

'I know! I know! But how does one stop doing it?'

It was impossible to prevent the news from spreading, with a fortnight's notice yet to run and an uncertain date upon which to tackle the Baroness. Myra had enjoined Vyvyan to keep her mouth shut, but Garson had already exploded to special cronies, until there was nobody left in the company who was not fully primed and under a vow of secrecy. When an unguarded word of sympathy was offered to Vyvyan Garson, she flared up and called the utterer a Judas.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE Baroness Von Lippmann received Miss Raine in her drawing-room. The winter was kind to the garden. On the lawn the first snowfall had almost obliterated the large clock-face composed of white pebbles and cactus, its numerals picked out in alyssum, its six-foot hands, which revolved, of wood padded with moss—the whole a memory reconstruction of the clock-face in the grounds of the Casino at Interlaken, where the Baroness had once spent a June. The cap of each gnome bore a peak of snow; their beards were white at last.

Always active, ever fighting loneliness, the Baroness was pleased to offer tea to Miss Raine. A stray visit from a member of the theatre was so unusual that her curiosity was aroused. Never, except for the annual dinner and garden-party to the company, had the two sat *tête-à-tête*. These functions, the hostess, cackling with gratified importance, enjoyed more than did her guests, who were apt to leave her gates in a fume at being promiscuously placed at table or put next the foe of the moment as partner, at being dealt with like a school-treat at the lawn-parties.

The hostess had, with garden-parties, an uncertain touch, and the incredulous actors were apt to be paired in egg and spoon races for prizes, antics prefaced by an anxious clapping

of the Baroness's hands and the cry, 'Now we shell hev' games an' den tea.'

Through the open window of the drawing-room, a large musical box, something resembling a glass-fronted coffin, would tinkle and grizzle the strains of 'Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht,' 'Ach, du Lieber Augustin,' *Il Trovatore* and *La Fille du Tambour-Major*.

'It makes to talk,' the Baroness often said. And attend these gatherings the company must.

The Baroness would, at six o'clock, stand at the top of the steps which led to the lawn, and, attended by a parlour-maid bearing an enormous tray, would deal out the file of departing players boxes of chocolate to the women, of cigars to the men. If you were clever, you kissed her hand. If you were merely the usual fool, you reviled her on the way home. Vyvyan Garson had once bobbed a curtesy to her, 'to see how she took it,' and the little hostess had flushed with delight, her naturalization forgotten. 'And,' Vyvyan would remark, 'exit the fallen laundresses' outing.' She had revelled in every moment of it.

When expected guests arrived for tea, the Baroness's table presented a scene of conflict almost Freudian. There was coffee, because she liked and was used to it, tea because her guests drank nothing else, bread and butter because it was English, honey-cake and Pumpernickel from Strelitz because the Baroness couldn't forget them, and more than a tendency to boiled eggs and potted meat, since she was now a citizen of a high-tea county.

Miss Raine, earnestly refusing more food, put an elbow on the table.

'You see, I—some of us feel that a tactful word coming now . . . and with your influence with Mr. Bruce—'

'Hey? Was it den dis Mr. Bruce who hes given her de sack?'

The little cheek-bones of the Baroness flushed with fury. Her guest wondered, for her hostess had taken the news itself without noise, had indeed caused Myra Raine to bring up her reserves in the way of pleas: Vyvyan Garson's years

with the company... the Baroness's liking for her... the fun she was... her father... the future—one had even admitted to loving Vyvyan oneself....

'Oh, I *know* she can be difficult. And she won't ask anyone for help, and I thought——'

But the Baroness was quite impervious to high-minded aspects of Garson's affair. She was brooding sulkily, mouth pursed into a withered button, her guest saw with alarm.

'That dumin-hang ass!' ejaculated the Baroness, 'I tall you, he hes made me to be samply furious. I bring Tottee to de theatre an' he forgats his manner—hey?—an' dere is de ferry tefle to be paid. An' once when de dawg hes become a cold, he snaffles in de middle of a scene, or I know not what, an' Mr. Bruce is like a mad cantankerous caterpillar. Oh Gawd! how I hate de beesley men! Beesley unreasonabe tefles! Dey are *all* beesley tefles from de grave by de cradle. Ho! I'll speak to ham!' And the Baroness took a long, sucking pull at her coffee.

This was rather awful. The affair of Totty's behaviour had certainly won a hearing for Garson, but if the Baroness was going to make Garson an excuse to raise Cain, and blare and trumpet her fury over Bruce's attitude to the dog under guise of concern for Vyvyan, it would put an edge on her tongue that would do Vyvyan no good, and Myra definite 'm.

'You are so kind, but—well, of course, men are devils, as you say, and Mr. Bruce has, perhaps, been a little hasty. But Miss Garson did rather *ask* for it, you know.'

'Eh, what? Ask for at? I bat she did no sort of the kind. It is just dumm tschalousy. I bet dis Mr. Bruce hes a fish to put in his kettle—a *belle amie* he wants to put in her place, eh?'

In short, Miss Garson could do no wrong, if pitted against one who could do nothing else, and the Baroness's growing championship of her ensured to that lady the perfection of the protégée.

Miss Raine modified the tactics to a letter.

'You sec, Barcness, if you seem to put it solely on the grounds of Totty, it rather weakens your argument of Miss Garson's talent, don't you think?' Her hostess pondered this.

'Yass. I see what you mean. I shell write de letter as you say,' she conceded reasonably.

CHAPTER XXVII

IT WAS a near thing, Myra knew, but Vyvyan was safe, back in harness and driven by Bruce, sulky and bewildered not a little. One didn't associate Garson with influence . . . his *nous*, annoyingly to himself, moved him to advance her to slightly better parts, and there it ended for months, until the snow-caps were beginning slowly to pour down the rubicund faces of the von Lippmann gnomes, as Vyvyan observed distastefully, whenever she was bidden to the villa, which was oftener than she was free to accept, with two matinées a week, plus endless rehearsals. Schooled by Myra, she kept the bulk of the visits dark. Myra knew that truth-telling over such a matter would savour of side to an astonished company who would be capable of gliding over the actual facts: that Garson went to the Baroness because, mimicry apart, she liked and even admired her, enormously respected her character 'on the whole,' and was moved with her to refreshing denunciation, with plenty of gesture, of the world in general. To the company's probable reactions Vyvyan contemptuously forced herself to pander.

One thing at least she had done for the little Baroness, intimacy once established. Casually, cleverly—one could wait and diplomatize where one's gratitude and affection were involved—Vyvyan had steered her back to her beloved music. It was not difficult; merely a matter of an apparently unconsciously whistled bar of Schumann, of cocksure statement that Wagner needed heavy cutting; a deliberately staged argument as to Act Three of *Die Meistersinger*, the Baroness blaring contradiction, Vyvyan going to the piano and committing an outline of the disputed bar, and playing it wrong, so that her patron, trumpeting, shoved her from the stool and played it herself.

('An' den you gat de passage for de strings. Dat is de entry of de Mädchen from Fürth and de dance. *Lum-tum-tum, tum-tum-tum*—oh, it is awfullee pratty.)

All this behind drawn curtains and shut doors. Even now the Baroness would not run the risk of being heard by servants or callers to enjoy German music.

Gradually music came to fill up those social gaps hitherto devoted to gossip or fulmination. Vyvyan even sang, simple *Lieder* that her father had taught her, in her untrained voice that was neither mezzo nor contralto. And the Baroness, skirt turned over her knees as she warmed her little shins, would look grimly into the fire.

All her life Vyvyan was to suffer from the delusion that she could sing. At her parties she would go to the piano at the smallest hint of silence, and the perceptive among her guests would grip their hands in vicarious self-consciousness. Even the Baroness stayed her tongue, from civility. And she, no more than Vyvyan's intimates, could quite define her discomfort. It was James Marsh who put his finger on the cause. Even Julian Carson had not perceived it. The voice was not his department, and he attacked his daughter's songs from the point of view that she was not, and never expected to be, a singer, and was placid at results so she sang in time and tune. But James Marsh saw in Carson's performances an artist from one sphere competing in another.

'La Garson has a streak of affectation in her make-up, and when she sings it all comes to the top. She's a downright north-country woman, and when she opens her mouth to music she's out of character at once. Dreadful, treacly motherliness. . .' To the inner professional ring he would add: 'And it's creeping into her work, too. I wonder what the complex is?'

They had happened to mention Myra Raine, and Vyvyan's face lit.

'She's a *dear*, a *dear*. But she'll never get anywhere. No personality. Pure reliable hack. Oh, how I wish I could exchange natures with her! She's worth fifty of my kind, you know. But on the stage—a housemaid!'

'Yass. I can imagine dat.' Loyalty was a fetish with the Baroness, but her shrewdness picked out the truth of Vyvyan's criticism. Sincere herself to disconcerting point,

she was antagonized. She was plucking about her boule desk.

'Yasterday, dearee, I hed a young man to danner. He hes written a play an' wants me to read it. Gawd! Whateffer do I know about such tangs? Now do be a saint an' read it also. It sounds like dumm nonsense to me, but you shall know. I could not make head an' tail of it, heh! heh! heh!' She passed the script to Miss Garson, her cheeks flushed pink. Her guest knew by now that for most men the Baroness—when she could forget the late Baron—had a penchant that would have done credit to Barbara Castlemaine. It had caused the Baroness to mistrust her own judgment in matters artistic. She knew an exploiter when she saw him . . . used her protégée as buffer against toadies.

It was over a month before Vyvyan was free to present her verdict.

'But, Baroness, dear, it's *great*! It's immense! It's a slice of life!'

'Oh, well, if dat is life give me dath,' cackled the other, who could sometimes make half a joke if somebody else contributed the first half. 'To me it was drearee an' dasmal in de last resort!'

'But— life *is* dreary; it *is* dismal. That's what makes it so fine, so utterly true! It's simply a dollop of life as lived by these people up here. Bless you, I know 'em! I've been brought up with 'em! That high-tea scene! Oh, we *must* put it on! You must *hammer* for it!'

'No, tank you! An' den hev them say I hed my own axe in de fire, an' if it is a dumm failure it'll be, "Ho, that Baroness von Lippmann does not know a play from a bull's foot, an' is only on de Commattee because of her money." No tank you! Not for me.'

On the way home Vyvyan thought how typical of her luck it was that the first gleam of real influence should be quite useless.

'I *breed* it!' she informed the hedges that led downwards to the town, and shifted the bulk of *High Tea* from one arm to the other.

And Amy had left without saying good-bye.

TO THE faint and helpless disgust of the company the directors decided to include *High Tea* in the spring repertoire. The newspaper reason given was that it would strike chords in northern breasts, and unknown dramatists received hospitality at the New Arts Theatre. One of the actual causes was the growing reputation of the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, which had recently been in labour with, and safely delivered of, *The Younger Generation*, by one Stanley Houghton, and was to follow it up with similar modern works: *Hindle Wakes*, *Hobson's Choice*, *Candida*.

Realities were evidently coming in, Sprott saw. Reality, apparently, meant wearing your day clothes, using up odd bits of scenery, being successfully rude to your stage parents, being advanced and funny about the Church, and having a bastard and being pleased about it. Sprott, sidesman at St. Botolph's, held his head. Either that, or the young woman had a scene with her young man in a shop, and took over the management of the business, which thereafter thrived as never before—a situation Sprott had never known to happen in the length and breadth of Howdlie, and guessed was never likely to, in his time, where clouts on the ear, bloody paternal vengeance in fields, and bitter tears of vanished self- and neighbourhood-respect were still the aftermaths of adolescent indiscretion, and maids were much too busy at the mills earning their eighteen shillings a week to become queens of industry. But if bastards were coming *in* . . .

High Tea was well written, certainly. But literature isn't drama. And it was outspoken. The author had spared his reader little in the way of Howdlian epithet. (To B or not to B, as Miss Garson had said.) The question was: did the townsfolk come to the theatre to be entertained, or to see in limelight that which they had left at home in gaslight? Was it going to cause housewives to ask for their money back if shown a sink on the o.p. side? Was it conceivable that the theatrically peeled potato would raise a laugh from those who spent thirty minutes of every day, all the year round, in peeling potatoes?

'Enter MAGGIE with her shawl drawn close.' But in three-fifths of Howdlie's cottages Maggie entered every working day with her shawl. Scraps of dialogue caught Sprott's eye. Maggie again, to the son and heir of the works-manager: 'Aye. You're a fine lad wi' your brass an' your carriage, Mr. Ransom. There's some folks'd say you've brought me to shame with your baby growin' under my heart. Sowin' wild oats, it's called. But I tell you; when you're tokened with a real lady she can give you no more'n what I have. And she'll be second in your heart, George Ransom, if you told the truth. Second to eighteen shillings a week, an' she with her dada's brass at her back. An' second with her brat, an' all. My baby's a Ransom, lad. Aye! And I'll call him a Ransom, no danger. An' he shall start at loom as his mother did, an' your granddad an' dad, my fine spark! How will 'ee like t'see our lad drawin' his nine shillin's an' watch the Ransom nose dip in mug o' beer in t'public come Saturday? Good night to you, young Ransom's dad!'

A most unpleasant young woman, Maggie. Sprott mentally congratulated Ransom on getting quit of her so easily. On the other hand, Wagstaffe, the author had hinted that he would put up part of the money for production, and the production would be cheap—pathetically so.

'ACT ONE: *Maggie Shute's Kitchen.* ACT TWO. *The Office of Ransom and Eyre, mill-owners.* ACT THREE: *Same as Act One.*'

Rehearsals were beset with unforeseen dilemma. Margaret Anderson, who commonly played straight leads, professed herself unable to touch Maggie, who was in a category hitherto unknown, being at once heroine and pure character. Myra Raine could not well be promoted over her head. Mrs. Apperley was too old, besides being obviously earmarked for Maggie's mother. And Miss Garson of insufficient importance. The rest of the women were too young, too newly joined. Damn.

He explained the situation in veiled terms at the first call, and courteously asked for suggestions. When the silence had

lasted an uncomfortable time, the author whispered diffidently.

'Pardon? Yes, yes. An excellent idea.' Sprott raised his voice. 'The author suggests that you ladies are all heard in Maggie.'

Miss Anderson rose. 'Mr. Sprott, I am so sorry, but I really don't think I can. I shouldn't do Mr. Wag—Wagstaffe?—any good, and it'll kill me with our audiences.'

'I know what you feel, Miss Anderson, but just a page . . . get the idea.' Sulkily, helplessly, Miss Anderson accepted a script. The company had already heard the play read, and Sprott rapidly selected the largest portion of monologue he could find. It was the Maggie Ransom speech. ('Silence, please, every one.')

Vyvyan Garson had missed the managerial solution of the casting problem. She was fooling in the wings with two of the youngest of the girl recruits, irresistibly drawn to youth, shyness, and illusions, and the schoolgirl tang of these children of perhaps nineteen in their solemn shirts and ties. She remembered her own first introduction to the company: her sight of that gathering of young men and maidens, seated in a collegiate semicircle like a hockey team as they read their parts in the new production. Friendly, dedicate, a little humourless and deadly serious, they had made room for her in the arch.

Vyvyan's girls were already a little out of hand. She adored to hear the giggle, the splutter, once more. For a week the children had hovered about her on the verge of idolatry. It was no longer so. The newcomers had privately, separately, decided that Miss Garson could not be of the slightest significance in the company. The other women didn't speak, or look at one, as she did . . . weren't so available . . . one was awfully fond of Garson, of course, but it made a difference. . . .

'Oh, shut up, Garson!'

Myra Raine heard, and saw, just as Miss Anderson was embarking on her first sentence. She tiptoed into the wings.

'Miss Garson——'

'Hullo, Myra, my lass!'

(Oh, why would Garson never play up to the scenes one staged, the atmospheres one created for her!)

'You're wanted on the stage, please, at once. No, not you two. You girls can be heard from the front.' Courteous, firm, she eyed the cowed recruits. One of them had already begun to smile ingratiatingly; there was no answering smile on Miss Raine's face. Similarly cowed, Miss Garson followed her.

Even her passionate anxiety—so that her face whitened, for Maggie's part—could not entirely obliterate Vyvyan's intense enjoyment of the period which followed.

Miss Anderson came of a local family whose trade beginnings success was swamping, and whose care for the deletion of the Howdlie accent was a religion. The Andersons did not say 'By gum,' but by-gummery was in their blood and outlook, and to Vyvyan her struggles to imitate a lady imitating an actress imitating a mill-hand were a feast for eye and ear.

'And now, if you will allow me a minute in which to change my costume,' quoted Vyvyan, in the refined, depressed accents of the serio-comedienne, 'I will give you a slight idea—little impression—of Miss Marie Lloyd.'

'Thank you very much indeed, Miss Anderson.' The author also ejaculated civility as the actress sketched a 'You see? No use!' gesture.

She had played the part of Maggie as one in a conventional stage fury. It seemed safer. 'I will appeal unto the Pope.' Catherine was in a rage, too, and also had to hold the centre of the stage. It was all one. The worst had happened to this mill-girl and she was very rightly extremely indignant.

'I see what you mean, Miss Anderson. Then—if you don't mind standing down—we'll try and make it up to you in the next piece.'

Myra Raine, who followed her in the reading, was nervous, but still intelligent. Her accent, of course, Vyvyan heard, was all wrong, but she was tackling manfully. If she had a version of Maggie, it was a sulky one; a 'Yah! you're another!' attitude of mind. This was a Maggie bested, at the woman's supreme disadvantage, and whining about it feebly.

'No, no, no, no, no!' whispered Vyvyan to herself.

Playing a part wasn't choosing a convenient and congenial theory. You had, in a case like this, to know your material from which the character was drawn. Darling Myra (bless her!) was a gentlewoman and a southerner—a combination not necessarily hopeless, but damning in the present case. There she went! Whimpering (*whimpering!*) to Ransom as she came to the beer and public-house climax. 'Good night to you, young Ransom's dad!' And she spoke the line movingly—a last-minute attempt at the wedding-ring and the lifted shame.

Vyvyan's God!

Had there been a door, Vyvyan guessed she would have crept out with a backward look (and her shawl drawn close).

'Anybody else?' Myra handed the script to Vyvyan. Garson, she saw, was already getting up steam, and she spoke to her with intentional sharpness. 'Buck up!'

Vyvyan fatalistically noted the fact that Bruce had overlooked her. The omission was inadvertent, her common sense told her—that common sense which was in eternal conflict with the morbidly sensitive artist in one. But it was a type of neglect to which one seemed peculiarly liable.

'Oh, ah, Miss Garson. Come along, please.'

In three lines Myra knew that she herself was wrong, and Anderson was wrong, and Garson was right. Pity—her own work stopped at mere perception of the perfect thing. Perhaps, after all, one's *metier* was teaching? It was a known fact that the instructor can inspire and enlighten without being able to do the job himself. Well, well, it was an idea to keep one's eye on for the future, this teaching, Vyvyan's Maggie.

She stood there, hand on hip, the fingers of the other splayed across her chest in a pose that placidly grasped a covering; her voice deep, a reflective singsong, as she baited Ransom, with a dour, appreciative smile.

Baiting him! That's what she was doing! She was seeing the grim fun of the mess she was in, and showing it him with all its potentialities of embarrassment. She even paused, chuckled, letting it sink in. You even felt she was sorry for Ransom in a maternal way, though she enjoyed the thought

of the Ransom nose buried in its Saturday-night tankard, heaved with advance amusement, left you knowing her for no betrayed fool, but rather one who had squarely picked her man for the night and would accept the consequences.

'Good night,' young Ransom's dad,' She said it lingeringly, almost affectionately, a glance at him—just a cocked eyebrow, a swift dropping of her eyes to her body, and she left him without fuss, a casual hand wiped across her nose.

CHAPTER XXIX

SILENCE.

'Well, then, that seems to be all.' A conference between Wagstaffe, Sprott, and Bruce.

'Miss Garson, then you'll take Maggie. Miss Raine, will you cope with Jenny? Mrs. Apperley, Mrs. Shute . . .'

The rehearsals of *High Tea* were the happiest weeks Vyvyan had ever known. There was the hope business and the hot flashes of incredulous joy. Then one had got it wrong, all these years? And one *was* meant to do well? Impatient, eh? Well, if that was the trouble, one could eliminate it from the programme. The one thing glorified everything.

Vyvyan discovered the earth. It smote upon her understanding one day in the Baroness's garden; her first real garden, dragooned and hideous though it was, one escaped to it at the oddest hours, and made the little Baroness happy too, incidentally. . . .

* Perversely enough, it wasn't so much the flowers that drew one to strange labour, as the fruit and vegetable garden. Their smells, their sturdy usefulness, the common sense and generosity that was a cabbage, and the beauty of it, if it came to that. A cabbage in the very early morning, beaded with water; it grew in the precise formula of the adulated rose. It sported humorous sprouts upon its side, and every vegetable had its own most exclusive treatment. These marrows that refused to mate and had to be assisted with a feather, the under-gardener said stolidly; and the bed-stuffy, stinking, and cheerful—you would make for them in the summer; the asparagus trench whose pickson inmates

demanding pig dung and soot; the vine that would eat amazing diet—ox blood and sewage—which caused the Baroness to cackle aloud.

A lifetime of interest, and one hadn't known it! And each month bringing its fascinating duties. And so, peeling off the first bloomers ever seen on female in Howdlie (except that the Baroness adopted a pair, too, and mirthlessly poked and peered and stooped, her little shanks exposed to the knee, her rear a strange expanse of checks), to the theatre, grimed a little, and singing.

And there, flashes of the old conflict, especially after a long rehearsal, when the garden began to fade . . . the blank left by Dene's lost friendship. The moment when the garden was very green in one's thoughts and one had leapt back to the old relationship, and remembered too late the Amy business, so that one had lost one's ease and dignity for nothing, even had Dene responded. The new girls being impertinent, so that one suddenly saw their game and flew out at them mercilessly, leaving a trail of bewilderment in one's wake. And the garden faded out, and one remembered that Amy hadn't written.

'I often go out with gentlemen.'

'Good night, young Ransom's dad.'

And the fears again for the child

'When Miss Garson has *quite* finished her nap—'

'I'm so sorry——'

In these moods. Act Three, otherwise full of interest, was to Vyvyan inexpressibly painful.

The second act concluded with a bitter scene between Ransom and the weaver who had looked to marry Maggie. The man, misjudging his own strength, strikes and kills Ransom, and ultimately is hanged. Mildred Eyre, Ransom's fiancée, learns of the cause of the quarrel and sends for and makes friends with Maggie. ('We both loved him, Maggie, and you are the one chosen to have and keep the living reminder. I wish, now, I'd had your courage. Don't shut me out, my dear.')

Act Three, nine years later, showed Maggie assisted by her little girl—young Ransom was, after all, not destined to the

tankard—laying tea for Miss Eyre. Over the meal Mildred once more presses Maggie to let her adopt the child, an offer which is sturdily refused. ('I've had bitter an' now I want sweet, Miss Mildred. Talk's over in t'town, has been this seven years, an' I'm a mother now, same as woman next door. Eh, dear! You've kept yourself respectable, Miss Mildred, dear, an' I'm sorry for you, I am an' all. It's small price t'pay for t'child, it is that. The shame business. Don't seem reasonable t'me. Summat for nowt, like.') And Mildred goes, baffled, watched by Maggie, her arm round her daughter.

And the child, a local girl, daughter of one of the stage-hands, had little to do but be roughly caressed by Maggie, to say, 'Aye, Mun.' But she was about Amy's height, and she had dark hair. And she took it into her head to adore one.

The look she cast round the cubicle: shy, wondering . . . her affection hard to part with, given in a rush, a matter of clutches and proflered, wilting cottage flowers. . . .

Here was a child—a real one.

One was kind to her. Always.

The father shouldered her home at nights. 'Coom on, lass. Scoot.' Unsmiling, good mates, they went out.

CHAPTER XXX

SHAWLED, made up, Vyvyan leant against the dressing-table, surveyed Myra Raine, shawled and made up.

'Oh God our help in ages past, my wench! I shall vomit if you hold your shawl as though you were a Spanish dancer . . . and my dear old Lord, *will* you bend out of Heving for a minute and look at the way Miss Myra Raine is walking in her clogs? My lamb, don't slide along. They aren't leather. Pick oop tha' feet, lass, an' put 'em down proper. That's champion. Oh God, I'm feeling so sickanall. This is awful. I wonder what would happen if one shot the cat in Act One? It might be a tremendous hit. All emotions straight from the heart, they are, an' all. "Miss Carson, whom we have hitherto associated with rôles of a lighter nature, revealed unsuspected depths——"'

A thump on the door.

'Well, we're for it. Do you believe in a personal God? Oh, I'm so cold.'

The curtain fell on the final act to calls for principals and author. Spratt wiped his face; turned to a friend.

'Well——!'

'But hark at 'em.'

'Always the same on a first night. Well . . . I suppose we must revive *The School* or try to get *Candida* away from the Gaiety. I knew the play hadn't a hope—— Ah, Mr. Wagstaffe, many congrats. I think we've given 'em something to think about.'

The audience thought so too. The stalls, filled with local parents, were disturbed, embarrassed, and bored. The dress circle wished there were something pretty to look at. But the pit and gallery, filled with working people, took their disappointment less frivolously; the mothers outraged at the reflection cast upon their daughters' morals, profoundly offended at the flippant success wrested by Maggie, contemptuous to laughter of the wrong kind (Spratt's ear had caught it from the start), of the assumed accents of the players—except for that Garson woman, who was so like one of themselves that it rubbed the insult deeper. In the boxes, two factory owners enjoyed a profoundly uncomfortable two and a half hours. This was the kind of thing that ended in strikes and God knows what, already the pit was craning to peer at them.

The London assistant-manager drank it all in. The show was a bore, of course, but if the Avenue was going to get hold of *Hindle Wakes*, one had better advise the Guv'nor to cut in ahead. *High Tea* had its moments, dreggily tedious though one found it, and if this was the way they carried on up north, London ought to know about it. Bit blue, that Maggie, and the language would probably have to be cut. One might print a glossary in the programme. Jannock, and so on. Unless that turned out to be an unprintable. A bit spicy here and there, that might save it. Certainly a novelty. Sentiment seemed to be going right out. Yes. On the whole, yes. Sharing terms with London. . . .

The assistant-manager would wire first thing in the morning to the Craven Theatre with a favourable verdict.

His stall had been far back. Unmoved by the fall-of-curtain applause and outcries, he had been genuinely interested, cocking a commercial ear, by the growls from the pit. It was pure bad luck which made him miss the scene at the stage-door, in which a scene-shifter, mistaken for the manager, received a bloody nose from a scandalized fitter who, for the sum of one shilling, had parted that night with every illusion he stood up in, and was removed to the police station after a heartening scrap.

Pending its London visit, *High Tea* was hastily cleared and a safe Shakespearian comedy put into the bill.

The failure had, Myra Raine saw, been bad for Vyvyan, withering in a night her dawning self-confidence and faith; confirming her in all her humble, fatalistic notions. Her pleasure at being offered the London run was ludicrous.

'And I'm riz to five pounds a week, Myra, my lass!'

'What!'

'I know.'

'You ass!'

'How d'you mean, woman?'

'Five pounds? For London? For the run of the piece?'

'Well?'

'Oh, *Garson*, I could slay you! Why—good Lord! you ought to have stipulated for a rise if the takings passed a certain figure, or for a percentage.'

'They wouldn't have agreed.'

'Did you ask them?'

'No.'

'Well, then?'

'My dear, I'm no use at bluff, and I can't be creator and saleswoman.'

'Didn't you put in for *anything*?'

'No. I thought it awfully decent——'

'Have you signed?'

'Yes.'

Myra was silent by an effort. She could not tell *Garson*

that she had been successful over the percentage question and had stood out, quite good-naturedly—you assumed the other party would respect fair play and reason, and acted accordingly—for a contingent seven pounds. Dene had given one the tip. One had always been capital colleagues.

CHAPTER XXXI

IT WAS the desire to escape from the house that made of Herbert Bowker a theatre-goer. The local theatre explored, he took to remaining in town after office hours, returning to Streatham by last trains.

He had saved, sunk the bulk of his money in the purchase of the Streatham house that was, one day—soon—to be a home again for Mabel and Amy (and, of course, the boys). That day—occasionally he faced it—was, somehow, receding. Always some excellent reason why they could not be together, why the house postponed being a home, and was, inside, he saw inexorably, a dirty abode run by slovens. One had abandoned remonstrance, lest they leave one quite alone.

What a good manager Mabel must have been! One could just remember her régime . . . but now, one hardly blamed the boys for coming back only to sleep. It was a solution their father had long adopted, save when letters with provincial postmarks came from Mabel—even sometimes from Amy—which drove one back to Streatham, to work at tidying the forlorn garden, at picking up matches and crumpled newspapers in the rooms, and twice had nerved one to rebuke the cook. That, on a day a new photograph of Amy had arrived from Bradford.

One avoided the shed at the end of the garden since a hoop and a doll's teacup were found there.

Sometimes Mabel and Amy occupied the house for the inside of a week, but Mabel's caustic criticisms of one's housekeeping, the rooms, the service, had filled one with bitterness, and left only a memory of Mabel's crisp scoldings of the maids and an atmosphere of guilt if one lounged anywhere. One struggled to assemble a family group round the

fire, or in deck-chairs in the garden. It needed organizing. Amy was conformable to petting and daddy's knee . . . would sit sedately upon it for as long as he wished. But Mabel, eyes restless, would give a temporary air to her own repose as of a gathering of forces against the imminent war on dust, catering, and dulled finger-plates. And, unexpectedly, she would take Amy to London to see names which were occasionally bandied across the breakfast-table. Mabel would know best. Yet, one had fancied that neighbours and office colleagues had rather a special manner for oneself: quizzical, or pitying. And jokes about grass widowers, very difficult to cope with when one didn't know oneself how one felt about the way life had panned out; whether, for instance, one had a case, a grievance.

Herbert Bowker remembered a summer evening when he and Amy had sauntered to the garden-shed, and he had gone inside and brought out the hoop while Mabel watched them from her chair; a pleasant nod to Amy, and the play that began; a something about the little girl's turn of the wrist as she guided the hoop, a way of breaking into tripping runs as she passed her mother, curls tossed back. An impression that disturbed so vaguely that no rational explanation was forthcoming. The call to bed, and the instant dropping from the child of her pretty playfulness, the animation which fell in a moment from her face, leaving it set, stolid for all its beauty.

And, after all, they weren't to have the home for which one had waited. It had become just a house on one's hands from the day a telegram from Birmingham, signed 'Landlady,' was put into one's fingers (no salver) by a servant-girl, temporarily amiable through curiosity. *Mrs. Bowker dangerously ill come at once doctor says pneumonia and pleurisy.*

Mabel dying in a provincial bedroom full of hampers, trunks, and oxygen cylinders. A neglected chill. Her age? Forty-six. H'm. I take it, the conditions of her life involved much travelling . . . draughty stations, and so on? And a look at one that, guiltless, one would nevertheless take with one through the rest of life.

The difficult croak from the bed, a silence between every syllable.

'Amy—must—finish—the—tour.'

And it was so. Herbert had hurried to the manager, who put the child in the care of Our Mrs. Bucknell. And one went back to Streatham and the office one daren't leave because the house had taken so much capital.

CHAPTER XXXII

YOU could choose your school of thought, where the Empress Theatre was under discussion, unless you were a woman. For the Edwardian mother, wife, and fiancée there was only one view: that that theatre was a sink of iniquity and a clearing-house for immorality. Exactly what you meant by this did not matter. The point was, that in a fostered, sheltered ignorance, you feared for your home either present or future, and occasionally (the servants ruled and dinner off your mind) hoped with fluttered futility—you could even make little jokes about it on your At Home days—that Dick, just down from Oxford, would not marry a chorus girl. The joke was permissible and lost you no caste, because aristocratic entanglement had created many a precedent, and the Empress Theatre was long famed for the way in which its Debrett-footlight marriages had sugnated that process which was beginning to alter history for many a manor'd family securely tucked away in the shires with its horses and dogs. Meanwhile, it made picturesque reading for the breakfast-rooms of South Kensington, though possibly the inmates of Berkeley Square displayed a growing tendency to skip the paragraphs.

The truly womanly and correct attitude to the Empress Theatre was one of entire uncharity. You went in a family party to that theatre because the entertainment was bright, pretty, and beautifully gowned. You could go there alone, to the matinée, for there were male decreed fashions in feminine susceptibility, and what made the Empire impossible to the end—that buckish aroma of patchouli which not even the family-party realities of the Astaires in *Lady, Be Good!*

with which the famed house closed its doors for ever, prior to demolition, could fumigate—was never the case with the Haymarket or the Empress. Even your girls could go on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when they could tear themselves from Mr. Lewis Waller in *Robin Hood* (Gladys was really becoming quite silly and positively jealous of Miss Evelyn Millard as Maid Marian, and this K.O.W. League was going altogether too far). And the maids complained they couldn't 'get near' the mantelpiece to dust it, with all these picture post cards . . . and Dorothy was deafening one with the *Havana* songs from the Gaiety until one writhed at the first bar.—'Don't you remember, Glad', the chorus of "Touring Newspaper Beauties":

'They were a lovely lot of girls
These girls from London town,
Each one was dressed just like the rest
In just a simple suit of brown.

And the Telephone Number in Act Two, and Gladys Cooper as the Exchange Girl:

'Are you there, Exchange?
What number please?
Ring up Cupid double-one two.
Double-one-two? . . . you're through!
Hullo, dearie, is that you?

'And wasn't Evie Green sweet in those white boots!
'I liked Jean Alwyn in that duet, "On the Slopes of Denmark Hill."'

'Dorothy, dear, *please!*'

Dorothy.

The foot of the mother of Dorothy and Gladys began its slow waltz-time rhythmic beat. *What* an attractive young man Mr. Hayden Coffin. . . .

It was the brave days of musical comedy.

Led into the field by *The Belle of New York*, *The Spring Chicken*, *The Geisha*, *San Toy*, *The Country Girl*, and *The Cingalee*, London was passing via *The Blue Moon*, that gave Florence Smithson of the crystal soprano to the public, *The*

Little Michus (high-waisted pink gowns, on the posters) and *The White Chrysanthemum*, to the Viennese dawn of Strauss and Lehar, and to that long pause of *The Merry Widow*, and the delirium that was Lily Elsie in her red opera cloak and feathered cloche hat, escorted by six gentlemen of the chorus in evening-dress.

‘Vilia, oh Vilia, the witch of the wood . . .’

and the bass booming of the ‘cellos, the ground-swell of double-basses; blue moonlight and the golden dripping of a harp.

From Northern England a tall, slight young woman had come south; one who knew the mills! one who, in spite of her inches, was eternally to give the impression of dainty minuteness—slender-formed, tiny-voiced Gertie Millar, whose plaintive face Charles Buchel rendered unforgettable in its Quaker Bonnet tied with black velvet strings. Gertie Millar, who, later, was to set many a wistful Georgian groping for a lost Edwardian day, a period somehow more remote than that of the Stuarts . . . to rush him back to melody and a tunefulness that vanished in 1917 at the blare of the first saxophone, and for which he waits to this day. The tiny voice, almost fading ere each final line was reached. The rising inflexion:

‘Oh, they do love a kiss up in York-sheer!’

And could one blame them?

CHAPTER XXXIII

ABOUT the Empress Theatre men had much to say, and look, and imply, or headshake and cough at. If you were a certain kind of father you could take the wild-oats line with your son, and congratulate him upon the looks and figure of his first experiment. If you were another type you threatened to cut him out of your will, or you could merely fulminate, or take a stall for the run, with opera-glasses. (Barmaids were to go right out when they closed the Empire promenades to the ladies of joy, and so widened the field of the latter’s activities.)

It was a typical mental remnant of Victorian thought which caused nobody to ponder upon the point of view of the Empress girls themselves.

If you had a green and chivalrous nature, you consoled yourself with the knowledge that, to the chorus and staff, Gloucester was 'Uncle Glossy,' and by the thought that no visitors were allowed through the stage-door. How you squared this consolation with the famous supper-parties in the Covent Garden Restaurant—patronized, it was whispered, by a Very Great Gentleman Indeed in that private room containing the gilt clock which, some twenty-two years later, was to end its days upon the wall of a delicatessen store in Baywater—or with those hilarious gatherings that all might gaze upon at the Savoy, was less easy. But, being a Victorian by birth, logic and clear thinking were not your strong suits, and it was open to you to hope and believe that all was well, and even to assert it, lest your conscience troublesomely compelled you to abandon the pleasure of seeing the Empress shows any more.

The Empress was a minor institution, just as the Pavilion was 'The centre of the world.' It was the sort of rendezvous which leapt instantly to the mind. You saw the same faces for nights together in the stalls. On Boat Race and Derby Night, you were, with those faces, turfed out of the Pavvy for playing golf in the gangway with a walking-stick and an orange, just as your father before you patronized the Brown Bear in the Knightsbridge passage until that closing night when a soldier from the adjacent barracks was killed by a pint pot, a violent, jocular demise which was to have the strange effect of rendering the passage for ever innocuous to nursemaids wheeling prams into the park. One, Harry Champion, had made a success with a song of which the burden was:

'Come and have a tiddly at the old Brown Bear. . . .'

Twice a year Sam Gloucester held what were described as auditions on the Empress stage. Here, pipe in mouth, he weeded and selected the almost voiceless beauties which were his asset and his personal hobby. You could, at a pinch,

train a voice, but you couldn't fake a figure or deceive the boys over a face.

Miss Amy Bowker was early gestured to stand aside among the certs and the possibles. The unwanted residue were thanked very earnestly and told their voices were almost too superior for musical comedy, and hinted to that upon the concert platform alone would they find their spiritual home and very great reward. And, his sparse black hair brushed back, his underlip jutting—that lip which was the salvation and delight of the cartoonists—his whole effect faintly Carolean (and in other respects as well)—Sam Gloucester would heavily survey his fresh batch of young womanhood, hand them over to the stage-manager and become Uncle Glossy of six more nieces, save upon those occasions when nature was tactless, and the relationship became confused, in the Borgian manner.

Gloucester's personal encounter with Amy Bowker—particular and outstanding girls were led to his room above the stage to sign their contracts, and the formality ended in sherry and biscuits, which to the recruit had the effect of pleasing inadvertence—was short, bland, and business-like, a combination well within the scope of Amy's comprehension, and what his tongue failed to convey, his face and eyes, to Amy, said for him—a country she had known from her eleventh year, if she had never trodden it. . . . Even one had heard rumours about Gloucester and the Empress. It seemed a very natural and obvious state of affairs. Exchange is no robbery. But it roused Amy Bowker slightly that the salary she was being offered was what she was earning at thirteen. This was where rumour had gone off the rails. And there was no other opening, since one had ceased to be a juvenile actress and wasn't a dancer or a singer.

Under the benevolent scrutiny of Sam Gloucester the girl seemed—he hardly knew how he received the impression—to be turning to some unseen person. Looking up, questioning, docile. It was gone in a second and she was smiling. . . .

'And about your surname, Amy,' his voice was brisk, 'er—have you a nice little middle name?'

'My middle name is Ida.'

WHEN she had left him, Gloucester sighed and put his feet upon a chair. It was a hot morning. Below, the gallery and pit doors made a break in the glass canopy which ran the length of the south side of the theatre. One could see the lunch-hour girls and clerks hurrying, and the shopping women from the suburbs. If they took several minutes to emerge from under the glass, it meant they were gloating over the photographs of the show hanging in wooden frames. Long pauses were probably of ultimate profit to himself and the shareholders—a coaxing in the Balham villa of seven-and-six for a dress-circle seat. It was the women of England who, in the last resort, kept the theatres going, just as they did the churches. Pious or pleasure-loving, providence had conveniently made most of 'em idle so that time was heavy and must be filled. Vases on the altar or flowers for the juvenile lead. A brainstorm for vicar or tenor, the result was the same—full seats.

Amy Ida.

And one had committed oneself yet again to the old round. Habituated to these girls so that one was restless without them and bored to exasperation with them. Costly, too. It wasn't their salaries so much or the stray presents one made them, as the disconcerting babies they would suddenly start—sometimes weeks after the sheer affair was over—so that one hardly felt one was the father at all. And very likely one wasn't half the time.

One knew all the rumours about self and theatre. They might vary on detail, but one was unchanging: that no girl was able to make good, or even to get in without becoming somebody's mistress. What the public would never know was that it was the girls themselves who had largely caused this undeniable state of affairs. Beauties all, they were offended if left immune. Failures, as much as the *débutante* who at her first dance is not surrounded. You had to keep the chorus flattered by insulting it now and again; and, being only human, and there being only twenty-four hours in the day (and night), you were forced, willy-nilly, to delegate the

bulk of the insulting to others—which had given rise to that other saga to the effect that the Empress girls were sacked if they couldn't fill two rows of stalls. Whether they did or not was then hardly your affair. They certainly tried to, in self-defence, for, if they failed to attract orchids, it meant that their chances elsewhere with other managers were impaired. Fellow-managers watched the Empress. It was a vicious circle.

Gloucester brooded. It was a pity, and no doubt had got beyond bounds. But women will always dictate sex-tactics and always have. One would, in austere moods, have liked to stop it, but it had now gained an impetus that was uncheckable. Oneself and theatre had long had a certain reputation, just as had the Haymarket for high comedy and the Lyceum for Shakespeare and melodrama. And any reputation was an asset, come to that. It meant at least that your public knew how it stood with you: the men thrilled and the women good clagues but virtuously denunciatory—a most useful combination, as contemptuous of the Empress girls for their 'frailty' as the girls in the dressing-rooms were of each other for the lack of temptation. What brutes women were to each other! How strange the chorus! Christ-like one to the other in adversity, tender, selfless; and mutually demoniac, despairingly petty in prosperity.

And one could now do nothing. What the public again would never know was that it was fully as difficult to have a reputation to live down to as to own one that needed living up to. The public had long cherished a picture of a Sam Gloucester as a genial, vicious, champagne-swigging satyr, and to explode it on them that, take it all round, one was more interested in Battersea enamel comfit boxes, would cause not only incredulity but loss of public confidence. Which was why the comfit boxes had to be kept at one's Surrey house, and, as one's wife said, 'Only dusted in whispers.'

Poor Carriel! She had cried enough tears to float a battleship, but they were now very good friends in the early autumn of their lives. She, if anyone, knew how things were. She had once said to him: 'I *am* so looking forward to your

first go of locomotor, Sammy. Then we shall have a little peace and be able to enjoy ourselves.' Well—she wouldn't have to wait long, at this rate.

And here they all were, 'struck so,' and unable to stop. Tumbling over and worrying each other, and it was nobody's fault. The girls didn't really like it—nobody could; he was soul-sick of them in his heart. The virtuous, fulminating mothers were only protective Madonnas gone sour, and the gilded youth outdid each other because, for some reason, it was the fashion. Football and cricket was where their wholesome hearts really lay.

What a life!

And yet if, one fantastic morning, one brushed into the stalls, stopped the rehearsal, and said, 'Let's try to get back to early hours and decency, let's have fun, but fun that amuses us and with no can tied to its tail, let me allow you to drop me, and no offence, don't feel you've got to empty young male pockets, that are living on their long-suffering parents half the time, to hold down your salaries, I tell you, let's *stop*, and begin on a fresh basis,' chaos would set in, and they would mutter that he was mad.

CHAPTER XXXV

IT WAS sixteen months before Amy Ida faltered in the dressing-room one night. She did not faint, but a momentary bewilderment came into her eyes. Violet Lestrelle, dashing a puff over her neck, looked up sharply.

'Are you feeling sick, dear?'

'I—no, I—no.'

Miss Lestrelle tweaked the dresser as she lumbered in.

'Gordy, tell Absolom Miss Ida can't come on for "Tell it me with Roses," and tell him to let Uncle know.'

In the passage Mrs. Gordon shrugged and tutted. Violet Lestrelle indicated Amy to a chair. 'You'll be A I in a minute, dear. If it's what I expect, you'd better take a pew and undo your corsets. Goddam these wreaths... pull one's fringe crooked every night.' She adjusted the bandeau of pink rose round carefully peroxidized hair, spoke through a mouth-

ful of gilt hairpins. 'You don't need to worry. Uncle'll see you through. Expect he'll send you to that place in Hampshire. Really ripping nurses—what I call educated.' She spat out a hairpin, draped a fur coat over her bare shoulders. 'That's where I went. *And* Dolly. So unlike our late dear Queen.'

CHAPTER XXXVI

JAMES MARSH, shouldering his way into the Cavour for luncheon, cast his eye round the tables, chose one opposite a table at present occupied only by one woman, stared and, at her remark to the waiter ('No. *Not* Liebfraumle! It tastes like rain-water that's been through the Dover tunnel'), rose, and walked the intervening gangway of carpet.

'Vyvyan!'

'Jimmy! My darling! Oh, this is too nice for words! Does one kiss you?'

'One does not. My dear girl! I am so glad about all your business. You *have* come along!'

'I know! Can you believe it? I can't. To have arrived! I mean—it's ridiculous.'

Unconsciously he creased his forehead. If you had arrived, you didn't recite about it in a restaurant, if you hadn't, it was one of those lies unlike plenty of other the . . . al tarra-diddles, that only did you harm. Still . . . Garson's present position would float exuberance. Just . . .

They had not met for any prolonged talk since the two years' run of *High Tea*, which had roused London and created a new dramatic form. James Marsh was increasingly busy at his press-agency and over all the social contacts it involved. From such a profession a lot of vulgar trivia were inseparable but the main issue, the exact science—it was nothing less—of leading ladyship was a fascinating business. Power behind the throne, given the right temperament to work for, even if to the public you had no earthly significance, because of the public's rather lovable knack of density and idealism, and for the curious reason of etiquette which forbade you to announce your profession in the telephone

book. The reason, possibly, that susceptibilities might be wounded and the show be given away.

After *High Tea* he had watched the confident productions of the Howdlie New Arts Theatre company, the eccentric character-leads that fell automatically to Vyvyan Garson. Over-production, he was fearing; an insistent plucking of one string that would kill the reality school of drama in the end. These things went in cycles, and, unless you were careful and cut out, you were hopelessly ear-marked in managerial minds as a highbrow dowl.

Garson's career was at an uncommonly critical period. He looked at her affectionately, practically.

Excellent clothes, but not the cut or style that got watched by lunching women or written about by gossip paragraphists; probably from one of the soberer and more long-established shops in Oxford Street, but decidedly from no French house. London women had abandoned the Merry Widow cloche hat now for two years, and were wearing enormous circular, flower-decked affairs. There were no flowers in Garson's coat, no special flowers on the table laid for five. (Perhaps it was still rather early days for those touches. One would be reasonable.) Her face lightly powdered, but not a touch of rouge or lipstick. . . .

He leant over the table, humorously worried.

'Vyvyan, you look dreadfully like a gentlewoman.'

She laughed. 'Ow down't sy thot, dear, and me not sowld a single bench o' vilets all dy, swop me bob I 'even't.'

Marsh looked round with hasty guilt. Luckily her penetrating voice had not been heard. The restaurant was filling rapidly. If the lunchers had recognized in Vyvyan the mill-and-flower-girl of half a dozen recent plays, the burlesque remark would have been so much to the good, and allusion to it would have appeared in the morning illustrateds. But an uneasy suspicion that nobody had recognized her rendered capricious cockneyisms either futile or damaging. He took stock of her anew, striving to arrive at an explanation while she talked of old times up north.

Hers was, he feared, one of those mobile faces, which, never the same for long, left no impression but one of charm,

ran up no flag for all to see. It defeated itself by very expressiveness. His fingers touched the switch of the table-light, turned it on as though absent-mindedly, and at once he was confronting a different woman: thinner, the corn-coloured hair darker. A faint reminiscence of Maggie Shute, so that already some luncher's eyes were on her, struggling obviously to remember where and when he had seen that face before . . . and giving it up because, James Marsh knew, the table-lamp wasn't up to footlight strength.

He sighed.

'Vyvyan, what's your next move? I see the run of *Peaceful Picketing* ends next week.'

'Yes. I knew it couldn't hold. I begged little Wagstaffe to alter the ending, but of course he's got swelled head by now, and it comes out in his work. He's beginning to exaggerate his types, and his psychology is wobbly, and he makes farm-hands with seduced daughters say things like "incomparable"—words they wouldn't have *heard* of, and tell people that their hearts are bowed like an oak-tree in a gale, when what they'd really say would be, "You bung out of here, mister. You fair give me the heaves." *Peaceful Picketing* was a good idea, but *ruined* by those false notes. But it isn't only that. You don't call off a strike because you are in love with the owner's daughter and suddenly see the point of view of Capital. Capital has a tremendous point of view, but it weakens everything to boost it through the affections. Wagstaffe could have got his effect of Capital and Labour having their truce in other ways, and still kept in that *wonderful* speech to the hands outside the gates. You know: "*Men, we're in a proper tangle, and, when all's said, it's not hate nor money we're striving for, but happiness and respect for one another.*" . . . Oh, and how well Terry does it, bless him!'

The criticism of the play was so entirely his own that Marsh breathed in momentary relief.

'And after this?'

'Oh, I've a nibble from the Diadem and a definite offer from the Albany. It's sad one can't take it.'

'What? The Al—— Not take it?'

'The New Arts company wants me still, Jimmy. I've made

it, you know. And the public is used to me in a certain line.'

Garson being a business woman. What a child she was! Marsh held his head.

'And it's not only that, but it would destroy nice little Sprott if I left them. They've been topping to me, *topping*. They discovered me.'

He saw she really believed it. He spoke with brusque, desperate earnestness. 'How long has the Albany given you to decide?'

'Well, I was going to telephone them after the matinée to say it's off——'

'Will you allow me to act for you in this matter?'

'You angel! I can't afford your fees. I'm only getting eight pounds a week now. You're ten, aren't you?'

He reddened at the remark, all unconscious though he knew it to be.

'We are agent and actress now, please. This is no time for fooling, my dear. I want you to empower me to close with the Albany to-day. . . . What salary did they mention?'

'Twenty.'

'That means they'd give thirty.'

'How heavenly it sounds, Jimmy! But I can't leave Sprott in the lurch. It'd be beastly.'

'Vyvyan, I hope I'm not more of a cad than most chaps, and I freely admit that there *are* disloyalties and breaches of moral contract galore in the profession, but this isn't one of 'em. You're sentimentalizing the situation. You've a water-tight case. Contract up, and an infinitely better offer. This mill stuff is nearly dead. I don't say it mayn't hang on for a few years even, but it'll kill you in the process. At present you're a novelty with possibilities, but don't outstay your welcome. I've known actors stay in theatres so long that managers clean forgot 'em when they were casting. You can act, you know.'

'I know, I know! But I couldn't bear Sprott's disappointed little face——'

'After lunch I shall close with the Albany for thirty pounds, please, Vyvyan. Let your Sprott know to-day.'

'But . . . look here. Suppose the Albany show's a failure?'

'It'll have done you good to have starred there. It'll count. It's a safe investment, if you only draw three weeks' money. These repertory plays are interesting and very damning. There's a parochial taint on that stuff that clings to you if you don't shake it off. My dear, there's no getting over the fact that if you want to count in the theatre, you've got to appeal to heart as well as head, and to sex. At present, you're only touching your audiences' brain, and, here and there, their emotions of pity and indignation, and you all hang on like grim death to your respectability, so that there isn't a man in London who'd dare—or want—to take you out to supper at the Savoy.'

'But——'

'You've got to make them love *you*, be restless for you, want to kiss you . . . suppose you married. Would you, of all women, consider a marriage complete which didn't include the body? . . . It's exactly the same with the theatre. Always has been. What price Nell Gwyn? She had the knack of pushing her charms and still liking her audience. Look at Sarah Bernhardt. She revelled in sex and men——'

'She had genius——'

'—and desires. She'd fight like a tiger for her man. Did. And the house *smelt* it. Ever know she was married? Chap called Damala. But only an incident. Threw things at each other. But every damn thing she threw got over the footlights! It was half the reason of her art. Look at Ellen Terry, her infinite capacity for love and loving . . . you're an intensely lovable person, Vyvan, and you've got it in you to rouse that emotion. Look, if it comes to that, at musical comedy—a base example of what I mean, a more or less reeking appeal to lust set to waltz time. And does it pay? Look at the Empress girls, perfectly examples of brainless sex creatures, with faces. But they have their silly little babies and sometimes husbands as well, and don't you think it tends to give them a wider humanity, except that their stage work doesn't call for it and yours does? But it certainly gives 'em *glamour*. It's that reputation for roitness that fills the seats. Glamour . . . that's what

you must acquire. And—*make yourself rare to the populace* . . . most sensible line Shakespeare ever wrote.'

'It's a depressing theory, James Marsh.'

'Don't be drastic. I've exaggerated a bit (not much) to bring it home to you. You always liked analogies and extremes. But use what you can of what I've said. Use that fine brain of yours. Confound!'

Four people were closing in on Vyvyan. Her luncheon-party, he supposed. And she had preceded them by a quarter of an hour. . . . He clicked his teeth, rose, and ran his eye over her guests.

A poet, so minor as to be valueless; the juvenile lead from the *Peaceful Picketing* company, his manner to his hostess half familiar, half adoring; a girl dressed like a housemaid and wearing a rosette of purple, white, and green: and Julian, Vyvyan's own father.

A very nice little party up from the suburbs! Marsh detached himself from them with singular difficulty. The human side of him was delighted to re-meet Julian Garson, if the demon of business nagged that prolonged chats with failures, however charming, were a mistake. . . . Even at his own table once more, Vyvyan would call across the gangway to him about recent books and poems. Marsh wrote in block letters upon his menu, 'I HAVE NOT READ IT,' and trained it upon the Garson table. Vyvyan shouted with laughter.

Impossible not to catch scraps of her conversation.

'Doesn't Julian look a dear lamb in that suit! It took a whole week's salary. . . .'

'I've just been told that you *must* have a baby to get on, on the stage, so take care, Terry my lad, or I may spring at you all promiscuous one night. . . .'

'But, Arthur, what you *will* not understand is that taxation and representation isn't only a Jingoism or an hysteric platform yell. It's Constitutional Law. . . . But can you blame them? My dear man, when you people were after the vote, you burnt down half Bristol. . . .'

CHAPTER XXXVII

AMY IDA'S daughter was born without complication or chloroform. The matron and nurse, pleased, sentimentally exclaiming over the pretty scrap (Pamela Olive? Yes, charming names), were also gratified at the attention paid in the days which followed to young Mrs. Bowker by that nice Mr. Absalom, who, arriving by car every week, would bring fruit and flowers in embarrassing profusion from Mrs. Bowkers' uncle, Samuel. Never, thought the staff, had they seen Mrs. Bowker so nearly animated. That pretty, urgent way of hers of asking, 'What must I do? May I see her again?' was, the matron said, really taking.

It was the doctor, conventionally genial, impassive behind bedside manner, long acquainted with Sam Gloucester, who pondered the case. That look of semi-incredulity, of faint alarm, that came into Amy's eyes at granted permissions . . . the helplessness with the baby, her request once granted . . . at sea.

Driving to the next call, he glumly surveyed the landscape. That girl. Under somebody's thumb all her life, or he was vastly mistaken. A product, not a person. Got her freedom, somehow, and can't do a thing with it.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SOMETIMES, sitting in the star dressing-room of the Albany Theatre, Vyvan Garson would be overcome by the supreme ridiculousness of her work. To sit, painting one's face, having evening dresses slipped over one's head, at three o'clock of a sunny afternoon, when one might be walking, or digging in somebody's garden. The absurdity of meeting the men in the company in evening dress and white ties before tea. A similar ridiculousness going on in a hundred little rooms all round the West End of London. An August day, and curtains drawn close, electric lights on everywhere. A heat wave, and getting into a fur coat, muff and toque for Act One. A cold snap in February and hanging one's woollens

over the chair-back to shiver into *crêpe de Chine*. Grown-ups, seriously, incredibly playing charades. And then, the warm wave of thankfulness to one's personal God for removing the money fear, for enabling one to give Julian a good club, books, concerts, even if one was unable to reinstate him in the musical world. And how kind every one was. Amazing. The letters from friends, forgotten acquaintances, from people once met or old colleagues from Howdlic who had failed, but generously rejoiced that 'one of our lot' had made a position. One read between the lines, glowed with pleasure at writing the cheque and the letter which begged them not to be offended. And they accepted it with thanks that pained one. Sporting, that.

One more or less discovered dress and what it could do, even while one chafed at the air and sunshine wasted over fittings, and chaffed discreetly scandalized French assistants, who implored Mademoiselle Garçonne to re-corset herself at the instant, because of their wilfully complicated inner linings with the almost invisible hooks that always came out wrong at the fastening. It was quicker to dress oneself, and the ministrations of a dresser of one's own were, by turns, embarrassing and definite hindrance. Her routine efficiency was confounding. You rushed round and were suddenly conscious of a wrong sort of silence going on, and there was Mrs. Palfrey standing with your petticoat elevated like the Host. Or you hunted for your suède court shoes, and the creature had them in her hand, dodging you for the chance to put them on your feet, kneeling.

A message to be sent out to a friend via the sergeant, and you went along the passage to give it, and somebody looked astonished and made cold inquiry for call-boy, Mrs. Palfrey—anybody upon whom to lay the blame for Vyvyan Garson having used her own legs.

And the acting-manager to be explained to, while you tried not to stand on one foot. And you returned, cowed, to your room, and took courage from Press cuttings. No doubts there:

'A new sincerity. . . Miss Garson is artist enough to refrain from exploiting the actual theatric chances of this part

that must have instantly compelled the lesser actress, and the result is a moving study.'

'Vyvyan Garson can say entire sentences with one eyebrow... the golden silences of art... the courage which effaces personality at delicate moments, dares to give the audience the use of its brain... how easy it would have been to ruin or commonize Audrey Vereker, and still delude the public into belief that here was a rôle well played.'

And photographs. 'Vyvyan Garson, who has scored an instant success—'

Photographs. All unlike Vyvyan, she saw, and (quite cleverly) all rather unlike each other. Apparently one's hair photographed black unless the light was dead right.

And the infuriating sub-editors who spelt one's name 'Vivian' half the time. Jimmy had warned that the slip of even one letter was harmful, with a public incredibly muddle-headed, to whom a Vivian and a Vyvyan were two separate actresses, be their surname never so Garson.

Vyvyan leant out of the window. It was not yet time to begin creaming her face, though her head was already encased in a bathing-cap.

'Stop that! At *once*!'

The drayman, in the narrow street at left angles to the dressing-room, looked round in indifferent surprise, as he callously jagged his horse's mouth. Then he brushed the slabby, patient cheek. Vyvyan's face turned white.

'Mrs. Palfrey! Go down at *once* and report that man. Get his name and address and the firm he works for. Hurry. There, you idiot!'

The dresser heartened, hurried off with alacrity, passed a crony from number fourteen on the next staircase.

'Well? How are you getting along with *Her*?'

'Oh, she's a very nice lady to work for. You know where you are with her. See you later, Mrs. Randolph.'

It took three weeks of letters to obtain satisfaction. Miss Garson was thanked by the secretary of the Dumb Friends' League—even by the firm to whom the dray belonged: the man was sharply reprimanded and threatened with dis-

missal. Vyvyan's broken nights of seething indignation were over.

Mrs. Palfrey returned to the dressing-room, found Miss Garson drooping, incredibly worn, who, as the dresser entered, rose.

'Mrs. Palfrey . . . I can't tell you how sorry I am for the way I spoke to you. It was indefensible. But that horse . . . they have such velvet mouths . . . and his eyes, when he was hit . . . it's such a ghastly betrayal to be unjust to animals . . . as though God let one down for nothing. We are their gods. But I do hope you'll forgive me?'

Mrs. Palfrey mumbled sulkily. Vyvyan lost her head and flattered her steadily.

In the passage Mrs. Randolph passed Mrs. Palfrey, tea-tray in hands.

'Well, there, Mrs. Randolph! Just as I was saying what a nice woman Miss Garson was . . . never know where you are with her, as the saying is.'

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE lessee and manager of the Cavendish Theatre refused one of Gloucester's cigars (why would Glossy smoke these young umbrella stands?) and leant back in the armchair.

'Well, it'd be an even more interesting idea, Gloucester, to take a show-girl straight out of the chorus and give her a legitimate part. I think I should be interested to try it, once. But, thank God, I'm not quite such a fool.'

Gloucester became carefully casual. 'It might be a move. It'd do us both good, Cavendish. Mutual advertisement. You the champion of the pore chorus gel and me the source of supply.'

They had been discussing that periodic Press-distribution assertion of Mr. Gloucester to the effect that at the Empress Theatre there was nothing except lack of talent to prevent the show-girls from rising to parts. The latest statement had duly appeared a month ago, and had, for once, been taken up, even challenged, by two newspapers. Very unex-

pected and rather awkward. Gloucester had hastily sent for his authors and distributed extra lines among the show-girls, and quite saw that if this sort of Grundyish partisanship went on, he might even have to make it worth the second lead's and small parts' while to be indisposed, and put on a few understudies, or one might even send 'em out at the head of Number One companies. Which would create a really infernal muddle.

As it was, the promoted show-girls were in a dismal state of flutter.

'Uncle Gloss! If I've suddenly got to say, "I've never bin so insulted in the whole of my life" in the Casino scene, it's a part, and I want more money.'

'Shall I be in the programme if I speak these lines?'

And, incredibly, 'I'd rather not have anything to say, Uncle Glossy.' Laughing, pouting, complaining in their little thin voices. He had downed the lot by bland reference to that clause in their contract which stipulated that they should act, dance, sing, and understudy at the discretion of the management.

In the general *mêlée*, Amy Ida had fallen heiress to several lines, and all you could say of that was that the audience at least heard 'em. Good girl. Amy. Never gave any trouble. Never gave enough, in a way. There was a rather valueless humdrum streak in her which was ineffective socially, and had led an unusually pushing and enthusiastic American patron, to whom Gloucester had leased her for lunch, to confide in Absalom: 'Beauty, I'll say! Profile, every time. But solid brass from the waist up.'

And, unexpectedly, she had made no sensational match, although Gloucester had led up several willing prospects when she emerged from the nursing home; and this again had led to the necessity of calling the kid Wilberforce, and would mean, in time that it would have to go through life as Amy's adopted daughter. One didn't grudge the expense, of course. But it was all rather the last straw.

It would be convenient to be rid of Amy. One would be willing to waive the two hundred pounds offered for her place by that youth who wanted it for his girl, but a stronger

motive was the plain fact that Amy's face was now four season's stale. And when a face was so unchanging, so memorable, it dated her. Less pretty she could have safely remained for years to come.

Decidedly, an opportunity. And if it gave Amy a real chance, reflected Gloucester paternally . . .

He pressed the concealed button under his desk. In Absalom's room two numbers would start up in their glass box—1 and 9. A. I. The initial system was his own idea and had saved him many a too-prolonged interview. There were times when you couldn't roar for help down a telephone. This was emphatically one of them.

'You sent for me, Mr. Gloucester?'

(Cavendish was revelling in her already.)

'Hullo, Miss Ida! Why, no. Must be some mistake, but I'm quite pleased to see you. Take a pew, m'child, unless Mr. Absalom wants you on the stage. Mr. Cavendish, Miss Ida of Ours.' Oh, well, she was floundering along with him quite prettily, and smiling as only Amy could. Gloucester, patriarchially watching fingered a one-inch oblong in his pocket. Blue enamel with a wreath of bay leaves. He had pounced on it last night in—of all places—Fulham Road. Probably about 1840.

Cavendish was pondering the door through which Miss Ida had gone at Gloucester's. 'Well—mustn't keep Mr. Absalom from his lawful prey.'

'I'd like to try out that girl in our next play. It's Renfrew's latest comedy. We decided on it last night. She should get away with the *ingénue*.'

Gloucester laughed. 'That's very charming of you, Cavendish, but she's under contract to me still, y'know. Don't pick *all* my daisies.'

They bickered amicably for ten minutes. When Gloucester had manœuvred the other into a hinted sum for compensation, he genially threw away his hand and offered to release Miss Ida for love. Carrie had often blown one up for these capricious soft streaks.

'Personally I hae me doots of the outcome, but I don't think she'll do Renfrew any *harm*.'

'Oh no; and, in any case, it's good publicity, Gloucester.'

'What man have you got your eye on?'

'Oh, James Marsh, if he's free.'

Gloucester, bored, privily buzzed the numbers 19, 15, 19.

In the glass box sprang up three enamel tickets. S.O.S.

Two minutes later Mr Absalom was being extremely sorry to have to call Mr. Gloucester down to the stage.

CHAPTER XL

VYVYAN GARSON propped her elbows on her dressing-table.

It was extraordinary how one couldn't command elation; how these black depressions came down on one however well work was going. There were of course, contributory causes.

Yesterday, a girl one knew had been struck in the face for heckling a Cabinet Minister about the suffrage at the Albert Hall. And she told one how she had spat out two teeth while Lloyd George on the platform beamed at the packed audience, and hinted at a 'special message' from Asquith.

A pity that one's cursed imagination, fed by fact, had supplied one ever since with the scene in minute detail. Two men—steward and supporter of the Pankhursts—openly at fisticuffs in the amphitheatre stalls gangway . . . elderly woman being dragged out on her back across the backs of seats. In an upper box, a dark-haired, tall young woman: Helen Ogston, armed with a dog-whip, and being taken out by two men who held lighted matches under her armpits. And, as pendant pictures, twenty-two-year-old Charlotte Marsh ('Calm') being forcibly fed, Emmeline Pankhurst being nearly kicked to death in the provinces at a by-election, Mrs. Macleod having her hair torn out by the roots.

Comic relief. The Brackenbury sisters training a furniture van full of suffragettes on Westminster Yard, a woman who went to the post office and had herself stamped and registered as a parcel and taken to 10 Downing Street . . .

And all the tribute one paid was money and insomnia, and one was rewarded by Press cuttings saying how one's art was

deepening. . . . And one would have to join in, too, loathing it. Not militancy, though, because there was Julian to provide for, and one's looks (such as they were) to preserve for the theatre.

That wasn't all, either.

The theatre (that place of entertainment) had plenty of items up its sleeve for one thing: things which clicked one awake at night just as one was blessedly about to lose consciousness.

The elderly artist with portfolio of his work. One had been impatient, brusque, trying to be the leading lady. And as he turned to the door his eyes had filled, so that one had a humiliating fit of crying before him, and bought three drawings.

And the all-the-time, world-without-end business of prostitution that study of the suffrage question had brought home to one.

And—oh, God! vivisection, that the medical student child had told one about at supper.

And the Christmas dinner one had unsuspectingly given to twenty-five children at Stepney.

Surely an atmosphere of crackers, holly, and children happily gorging could hold nothing to disturb? Yet it had.

A little girl of nine, who had brought up her dinner because she was unused to meat and had had nothing but bread and margarine all day. Another, who wrapped her wedge of pudding in her handkerchief for the family at home. Girls of ten and eleven doing irreparable harm to their stomach muscles, hoisting four-year-olds into chairs. An ailing baby, brought because it couldn't be left. Sore eyes? Cold? What was it that doctor one had had to Sunday supper said? 'Basic disease. Most of these outward symptoms are due to inherited syphilis.'

Vyvyan smote the table. If ever one had a child, it should be as perfect as decency and care and horse-sense could make it.

And that wasn't all, either.

One had guessed for years now that one was losing Amy. Somehow, life had contrived to make her inaccessible. One

had fought it, gone to see her at the Empress Theatre even; and been kept hanging about passages, unrecognized? while sundry permissions were obtained, and the sergeant decided that here was an unprivileged face.

Impossible to get near her, spiritually, in that roomful of girls. One amazed at their poise, combined as it was with the eternal 'Pleased to meet you.' One became nervous and fidgeted before a young-lady Amy in a silver sheath gown, one of six duplicates, with a tiara on her smoky curls—some Ruritanian show involving ladies-in-waiting to Grand-duchesses.

'Pleased to meet you,' said the five ladies-in-waiting, and went on howing lips with scarlet.

The sixth sent the dresser for a chair, said 'Will you take anything?' and 'You're doing fine these days, aren't you?' which, for some reason, made one feel extraordinarily small. And one received the impression that, the first flush of meeting over, one's exclamation, 'I used to teach this little rabbit her lessons,' had been a *faux pas* to the ladies-in-waiting. It was an impulsive reminiscence with which none of them seemed able to cope.

Indefinably chilled, one had leaked away.

And there was that time when one had lost sight of Amy for months . . . had written to her father, who confessed that he, too, didn't know where she was.

What parents! And one had hoped so much for . . . from the mother's death . . . and now, one practically waited to be invited to see Amy at her flat, except when, overcome with belated indignation and sense of one's position, one telephoned her to beg for her attendance at one's parties.

Then—one had got it wrong, all these years? And there was no bond? Were these things often one-sided? Love ever futile? The self-possession of Amy at once left one stripped of warm purpose and gave a certain guilty relief. Delegated responsibility. Or was that just sour grapes? They had to grow up, these children. In any case, life had probably done its work with Amy; trust the Empress to finish what Mrs. Bowker had begun, whatever that was . . . but one hadn't quite reckoned on such self-sufficiency, such inelastic poise.

One had failed to get the child into one's own keeping, but one waited for an adolescent who should meet at all points that female thing that was oneself at the same age. Vital, stumbling, gauche, adoring, and, one hoped, likeable; hair that wouldn't stay up . . . gullible . . . conventionally morbid, religious, fearful, susceptible, as the years between fourteen and eighteen decreed.

If Amy had gone through that, one would never know how. If one could only kid oneself into belief that the change in Amy was due to one's position at the Albany. . . .

Have her to tea in the dressing-room? Stage a perfectly good scene of a leading lady having the megrims? But probably one would laugh in the middle of it. Stars had to have had practice in giving trouble. Screaming with rage over a delayed dress . . . hitting the dresser . . . throwing things at one's manager . . . fainting with fury, emotion, or jealousy. It read well—but what childishness, what foul taste and manners! Dresses sometimes were delayed, and one fumed a bit and cursed and became distinctly anxious, and then some poor little anemic worm was framed in the doorway, hardly able to apologize from nervousness, and what could you do? And she faded away and probably had to wait in the rain for a bus to some suburb, and probably her stockings were damp when she got home, and her mother watching the clock and wondering when to put the kippers 'on.' And the girl's eyes would be hot and sandy from peering into the tiny stitches of the tulle flounce.

CHAPTER XLI

PLEASE, Miss Garson, there's a gentleman downstairs wants to see you.'

'Show him up, Mrs. Palfrey,' answered Vyvyan wearily.

'I tole 'im you only 'ad ten minutes,' suggested the dresser. Really, Miss Garson didn't ought to let in every Tom, Dick, and Harry way she did. Made a person look silly, always agreein' and havin' to show 'em up an' no bones about it. Bad for tips, too. Mrs. Randolph with Hers had a much more lively time, and money passed.

'Oh, Jimmy, my dear, how nice of you! And just as I was *that* low!' Vyvyan had sprung up, was placing chair, offering cigarettes, colliding with the dresser all set for the same duties.

'My ankle, I *think*, Mrs. Palfrey.' The dresser retired huffily.

'My dear Vyvyan, I'm not going to keep you. Six minutes ought to see me out.'

'Don't say that, lad.'

'Now, first of all, are you conscious that you're digging yourself in?'

'Certainly.' Vyvyan spread her arms, indicating the room. 'What more d'you want?'

'A great deal.' His eyes followed her gesture, halting at the dressing-table. 'Have you ever seen the stage-hands setting a scene?'

'I'm not stone-blind, Jimmy.'

'Well, then, what's the matter with Miss Vyvyan Garson setting a scene in her own dressing-room and staging a recognizable picture of a star's quarters? This room wants new curtains and carpet. Upon your table I see one wooden hairbrush and one clothes brush embossed with the Angelic Choir, one pressed powder bowl, a battered hare's foot and five essential grease-paints upon a strip of coloured cretonne. Upon your wall is flapping a political poster in purple, white, and green. Upon the window-sill are four earthen — e bulb bowls——'

'Aren't they darlings? Hyacinths. The Baroness sent them.'

'Which Baroness?' James Marsh cocked an ear.

'Von Lippmann.'

'Oh.' He lost interest. 'Well, here then we have you, working, resting, and receiving in a place that is a plausible imitation of a Board School at the Band of Hope annual entertainment, or the den where our leading anarchists plot bombs.'

'Darling! You mean I ought to be festooned with orchids from Solomon and Coty's pullumes——'

'The maddening thing about you, Vyvyan, is that you *have* got a brain.... My dear, while I was downstairs I

heard a disturbing remark. I heard someone, never mind whom——'

'Who, Jimmy. Who. Never mind *who*.'

'—say: "Get Miss So-and-so's tea up punctually, or there'll be the dickens to pay. Miss Carson never minds being kept waiting." He leant back, drew some newspaper cuttings from a pocket-book. 'On Tuesday last——'

'—you called me dog, and sat upon my Scottish Aberdeen, Shakespeare,' murmured Vyvyan.

'you gave an interview to the *Daily Comet*, in which you said that you never wanted to go on the stage, but "leaked on" by force of circumstances. *Did* you say this?'

'I did, Jimmy. It's true, you know.'

'You also said: "I can't ever believe that people want to meet me. I am so used to being the one to want to know other people."'

'And *that's* dam' true.'

'And: "Take it all round, I am more interested in authors and singers than in stage folk."'

'They *are* more worth while, I believe——'

'—and ended with: "Before I commenced my——"'

'Oh no, Jimmy, never! "Began," not "commenced." Only housemaids commence. I'll give them what ho for that!'

'"—stage career, I was an underpaid schoolmarm."'

'Well, wasn't I?'

'How is that going to sound to the public? This outspoken stuff is all right for established actresses, but not for stars still on the make. You've succeeded in giving a thoroughly blunt, drabby, and unattractive picture of yourself, just at the time when the public is focusing on you, *and* when you're fresh from a series of blunt, drabby, and unattractive plays.'

'James, I must be myself. What's the use of turning into a bad imitation of a score of other women? The only value one's got is to be sincere. I like to be as God made me—didn't Emily Brontë say that? I may be all wrong inside, I probably am, but at least it's *me*.'

'You can be yourself *in time*. I'm trying to make you see

that you must build your career every bit as much off the stage as on it——'

'Which means that I'm to become a liar, letting off platitudes I don't believe in——'

'There is one more thing. It's my business to hear rumours, and I know that Lady Stillminster—the Countess, I mean—asked you to her house-party at Stebbings. And you refused.'

'I don't trust, or like her, or respect her. She is a vulgar parasite, an intellectual snob of the first water.'

'She is one of the most important amateurs of the arts. She is wealthy and well known; her house-parties are invariably paraphrased and photographed.'

'I couldn't eat her salt, feeling as I do, knowing about her what I know.'

'Is her character and private life your concern?'

'I make them so by associating with her. I am helping to make women like her possible by lending her my time.'

He strove with his temper: spoke carefully. 'A week ago, I had a most temp'ing offer—financially: to give my exclusive services to a certain young actress. Vyvyan, I would work for you for half what I was offered, because I believe in you. I'm not quite pure vulgarian. Put yourself into my hands. You'll thank me, one day. My dear, you love your work—now.'

'Of course I do! Huh! Haven't I gone through enough for it? Bad food, bad parts. Love it? I adore it! But can't run away with the idea that I'd live that part of life again. That was sheer helplessness.'

'Vyvyan, don't let any little scrub actress get ahead of you.'

'If she's a scrub, it couldn't happen.'

'Then you'll face the idea of my giving my time and knowledge to boosting—to boosting a girl who isn't in the same hemisphere with you, and never could be?'

'Naturally not, if it were possible. Jimmy, exactly what would it involve if you "worked" for me?'

'You would have to let me vet your interviews, see that you were included in symposiums on topics of interest to women——'

'How d'you mean? If a topic's interesting, isn't it so to men as well?'

'You would have to allow me to exercise a little tactful control over the people you meal with in public places. You would hire a car to the theatre. I should see that you accepted the right invitations and weeded out wrong 'uns. I should keep a stricter watch over the people you admitted to your dressing-room. I would put you in a star booth at the Theatrical Garden Party. I went, last June, and where were you? Ambling about, free to all, in your Maggie Shute mill-girl shawl, selling buttonholes that nobody wanted because you were too dead easy, and the costume was too unbecoming, and you'd not a ha'porth of make-up on your face. I'd have the public queuing up to see you and paying double the market price for your signature on a box of chocolates——'

'It's slavery, James.'

'Of course it is!'

'And if it means scrapping my conscience and my instincts and my sense of humour, and cutting old friends—I'll do it without that.'

'You can't. You've made too unfavourable a start, unless you stop *now*.'

'I will. I tell you! *Oh*, how angry you make me! . . . Who is this girl you're going to work for?'

He picked up hat and gloves.

'I'm sorry. But officially, you know, I have no clients.'

Mrs. Palfrey, returning to find Miss Garson in floods of tears, brightened, and looked hopefully at the door by which the gentleman had just left.

CHAPTER XIII

EVERY day Amy Ida was instructed to go to Conduit Street and suffer tuition in elocution and diction from Madame Myra Raine, whose studio, though by no means the most famous in London, had long enjoyed an excellent name for its dealings with the human voice.

Often Mr. Marsh came too, and sat and listened and made notes.

Amy had once brought her little daughter, and met him on the staircase, and he had picked up Pamela, apologized, and taken her back to the flat in a taxi.

'Never bring her again, Miss Ida.'

Disappointing . . . but the nurse was, they said, a very good one.

'And—you know—don't mention her.'

'No, Mr. Marsh. But what *am* I to do?'

'What did Gloucester tell you?'

'He said, better say Pam was my adopted daughter.'

'Bah! Nonsense! How old are you?'

'Twenty-two. Going on twenty-three.'

'Well, then! What's a girl of that age wanting to adopt a child for? It's ridiculous—on the face of it. If you're not likely to be getting married soon, say she's your half-sister. If you are, keep her out of sight until a few more years have rolled.'

'I see.'

'Bother is, I want the child for photographs with you. Mother and child studies always sell well—and, by the way, don't forget that when firms approach you you can stand out for a royalty on sales. Still, I'll see to that end. And now, we mustn't keep Madame waiting.'

Standing in the middle of the studio, facing Mr. Marsh and Madame Raine on the sofa, one said strange things.

'A tharsand years the charld has gone to Canada.'

'Again, please, Miss Ida, you *must* watch those vowels. "A thOUSand years the child has gone to CanAda." There's no "i" in Canada. It's not like "canister".' She turned to Marsh, murmured, 'Extraordinary, isn't it? Luckily, it's faint, and will be fainter to less sensitive ears than mine.'

Then the rôle itself that Amy was to play, Madame Raine studying it line by line. 'Now, I can't direct you much, here, or I shall be falling foul of your producer. But one or two things occur to me. It seems to me that you smile too much in all your scenes. This is high, not musical, comedy. You *have* a delicious smile, Miss Ida, but you must learn not to squander it. Then—er . . . don't look at your audience so

much. That's a pure musical comedy trick you must forget and drop for ever. Look *through* them, not at them. Again . . . again . . . better . . . *don't twiddle your hair!* And when the juvenile lead kisses you, don't stand making a rosebud of your mouth *waiting* for it. This girl, Mona whatshername, would never dream or dare to do it. It's your first kiss, Miss Ida, the first kiss of a young, infatuated, sheltered, shy débutante. Let *him* do the kissing. And offer him, so to speak, a flat surface. Now, again. I'm the young man who's going to kiss you. . . . How's that, Mr. Marsh?' 'Infinitely better.'

And so on, for half an hour, when Marsh **snatched** her from Madame for his own purposes.

' . . . And, no swearing in the theatre, Miss Ida. It isn't the Empress. It may amuse your colleagues, but doesn't suit your new work or your profile. And if the leading woman (who is Godalmightier than any of the Empress crew) gives you motherly advice, drink it all in and thank her—and come to me with it, and we'll sort it out. And I shall be at the flat at ten to-morrow morning. If the phone goes, tell your maid you're resting; make a list of what suggestions and offers and what-not you get, and I'll deal with the lot. Good-bye. Your photo'll be in the *Evening Star* to-night.'

He did not add the usual 'God bless you' or 'Good luck!'

CHAPTER XLIII

JAMES MARSH was punctual in his stall and sat, feeling the pulse of the house as far as a first night, hysteric and partisan, is susceptible of diagnosis. Renfrew's play was, he soon saw, not too good; the usual porridge of conventional situations (when would playwrights tumble to the fact that there are dozens of human relationships waiting to be explored and exploited? This which didn't come under the 'bed and breakfast' category), and the whole was welded together by that cursed commodity, the star system, by which any plot becomes a foregone conclusion to the experienced playgoer.

The well-advertised appearance of Amy Ida (entrance

through a French Window, in organdie, holding flowers, oh God!) created a side interest which nearly threw the play out of focus. She played the part, Marsh observed, quite as badly as the score of ear-marked London *ingénues*. But the stalls and boxes saw punctually what they were being required to see—an Empress girl in process of evolution. Even the critics on either side of him were becoming mentally side-tracked. Even a dramatic critic is a man. Why didn't their editors neuter them on giving them the job? Still, that look on their faces—at the worst paternal—meant they would write valuable stuff for the morning papers. To-night, Amy was fool-proof.

'Eu Leydy Alison, I didn't see you were heer.'

'Oh, my God!'

Even as Amy Ida's voice struck upon his ear, James suddenly leant back, overwhelmed with discovery.

He knew that he loved Vyvyan Garson—would love her till he died.

CHAPTER XLIV

HE WAS at Amy's flat as the clock ceased to chime, had a vision of little Pamela being scooped out of the way, and began to deal with the affairs of Miss Ida. The machinery was already in motion; the post would, later, yield up its quota of tribute. The telephone had, said Amy, 'gone' four times; two offers from other managements, one from a music-hall, one from a newspaper wanting her views upon the legitimate theatre. A symposium. We have already approached Miss Vyvyan Garson and Miss So-and-so, and Mr. Somebody Else. James Marsh screwed the cap on his fountain pen.

'I'd better know what you do think, Miss Ida. I'm not fearfully keen on opinions being written entirely by Press agents. It's awkward, sometimes, if the actress doesn't happen to see the newspaper, and comes out with a different view in public.'

'Oh, well, it's very nice, I thought.'

'Is that all you thought? Never mind.' He wrote briskly.

The *Evening Star* was able to let its public know that Miss Ida, our latest and perhaps most beautiful recruit to the legitimate stage, was excited over her part and the play; awfully touched and surprised over the kindness shown by everybody and the help they had given her; why they should, Miss Ida couldn't imagine. Her chief ambition was to act and move like Miss Ara Semphill. Miss Ida had had a terrible moment when her cue came. One listened for the orchestra, confessed Miss Ida, and of course there wasn't a note! The comparison, said Miss Ida, of the musical comedy stage with straight stuff was amazingly interesting, and oh! what a lot there was to learn! Miss Amy Ida felt, and owned up, that she felt a great big imposition. But how wonderful it would be if the public could like one, and how hard one meant to work. 'Tis not, quoted Miss Ida, in mortals to command success, but I'll do more, Sempronius, I'll deserve it—that is, if the public continues as marvellously kind. . . .

Underneath, in a paragraph half the size ('We can't use all this heavy highbrow stuff,' fretted the sub-editor) appeared a smudgy portrait of Miss Garson, round which her opinions meandered. 'The trouble with the theatre is that it is becoming hopelessly commercialized,' wrote Miss Garson, in her flat. When I look round and see the monopolies into whose clutches our drama has fallen, I am not surprised that the majority of our plays are poor: I only wonder they are so relatively good.'

Three times more the telephone rang, and James stretched out an absent hand.

Arcadia Photographs speaking. Would Miss Ida give them a sitting? She would—but impossible (here he batted Amy off with a scowl) for at least three days.

Clipon Corsets speaking. Would Miss Ida consent to wear a presentation pair and give ordinary acknowledgment? (Here he beat her off again.) Miss Ida's secretary speaking. Miss Ida regretted it was impossible. 'Wait for the Satin-snug and the Streamline to offer,' he told her, 'they book bigger space in the good magazines. Don't snatch at everything; they'll get keener if you hold 'em off. And you want

some rest.' Not that her sort ever got tired. They didn't give out enough. . . .

He looked patiently, briefly, at the perfect mouth. And her toughness and vitality would pay for his and Vyvyan's home.

'Never forget,' he was saying pleasantly, 'that the function of the actress is to please. Tell the public what they feel they ought to be hearing. It gives pleasure, and that's an end in itself. . . Miss Ida, is your father alive?'

'Yes.'

'Excuse me, but what's he do?'

'He's assistant-manager of an insurance business.'

'Um . . . any hobbies or characteristics?'

'I—no, I don't think so.'

'Your mother. Is she alive?'

'No, Mr. Marsh.'

'Don't worry, if you'd rather not speak of——'

'Oh, thank you, no. That's all right.'

Patiently he laboured, extracting facts, watching her face. A worthy and useless pair of parents. Streatham, too! All the same, the mother's death must have been a wrench to the girl even if she'd forgotten it. My mother made my success . . . or—anyway, the maternal-tuition touch. No. Better leave her out. Too many actresses running their mothers as buffers against possible indictments of loose conduct. Jo! . . . was that by the time news of their mothers was of interest, the stable door had generally long been ajar and the horse stolen. His eyes screwed with amusement. God! What verbal scraps he and Garson would enjoy! Hit her with one arm and throw the other round her . . . never a dull moment. Hadn't he put her to bed when she was fifteen . . . sixteen? Why hadn't one grabbed that memory till now? Undressed her, too, come to think of it, without a cheap thought, then or now, on looking back. . . . But the preliminaries, the standing on the o.p. side of her at the altar, would be a severe trial of their sense of humour. And yet there was a queer Christ-streak in Garson . . . 'Yes, Miss Ida's secretary speaking. Who? Miss Gar—— Good morning, Vyvyan. Marsh speaking. Yes, this is Miss Ida's flat. Yes, this is James Marsh.'

Grimly he enjoyed Garson's shorn amazements and last-minute tact.

'My Amy, Jimmy?'

How very Garson to overlook the note on which their last interview closed.

'... But give her my dear love and oceans of congrats on last night. I'm told she made a *topping* start. But I want to see her to-day, bless her!'

The golden voice, speaking schoolgirl lines.

'Would you like to speak to her?' He gestured Amy to the telephone, listened to the girl's polite, chippy little thanks and disclaimers, reconstructed from them Vyvyan's remarks, came to a conclusion.

Vyvyan loves this girl, and the girl doesn't give a damn.

She has no damns to give.

But she's only human?

Vyvyan had a talent for casting pearls before... part of the prodigality of her make-up. Wants to speak to me again?

'Yes, Vyvyan?'

'Jimmy, am I in disgrace?'

'Certainly not.'

'Oh, good! My dear, I've just done a terrible thing.'

'I can believe that absolutely.'

The husky laugh. He spoke casually.

'Suppose I come round and hear about it—that is, if you—'

'Oh, lovely! Lovely! Will you?'

'In an hour. And now I must ring off. I am keeping corsets off the line.'

CHAPTER XLV

JAMES MARSH had seen in a moment that Vyvyan was keyed high (even for her). His own announcement would wait. Indeed, it would have to. Vyvyan was singularly like the child to whom nothing and nobody exists save its uncommunicated news, who knows no innings but its own. Life had failed conspicuously to endow her with the adult's patience. Possibly it was one of the reasons that had, he was

hearing these days, made her unpopular in the theatre, save with the enslaved, useless minority. You will never, he recognized, teach these sincere natures to train their guns of charm upon the right people.

His hands ached to touch her.

'Well, Jimmy-my-lad, I've been and gone and done it, this time.'

He waited.

'My dear, I'm engaged.'

His hand felt for and clutched the mantelpiece.

'I sweated with terror when I'd said yes. He's asked me three times, you know.'

'He? Who?'

'Wagstaffe.'

'What?'

'I know! I couldn't have believed it myself! I think I couldn't see him clearly when I was acting in all his plays, but when I went to the Albany I got him into focus. And as far as I can make out, he's got my type of mind. For instance, he's dead keen on the suffrage, and eugenics, and hates cruelty and wars—everything that matters. . . .'

He was remembering with accuracy everything that Vyvyan had ever said about Wagstaffe before this happened: swelled head; false psychology, she had come out with the whole thing. Now, with piercing penetration, she had discovered the reverse side of the medal and was carrying on about that. And one couldn't do anything about it because one loved her and had come on the same errand as 'little' Wagstaffe. Come to think of it, they *might* make a go of it . . . sitting priggish (with a hateful facility he coined contemptuous words) about the sorrows of the universe, and having mutual admiration societies together.

Incredibly, one thought, God help Wagstaffe. Then, God help James Marsh, and most decidedly, God help Vyvyan Carson. Somebody (it was unexpectedly James Marsh) was saying truculently:

'Well . . . I see. . . . This is interesting, as I'd looked in to propose to you myself.'

Her eyes lit. 'You don't mean it? Jimmy, how heavenly

of you!' (As though one had offered her a box at the opera.)

'You mean it? You dear!' (Her hands on his shoulders, tears rolling down her face.) 'But, my lamb, it would *never* have answered. We're both too dominating, you know. And I infuriate you. And, of course, you're pure materialist——'

'All right, Vyvyan.'

She was inwardly apologetic, and so became excitable, in default of apology. 'You *know* we don't agree about the things that matter. Our insides aren't the same. Oh, Jimmy, I could forgive you if you went off with another woman—if she was a second-rater—but I couldn't get over a mental affinity affair. Now, to you, your physical infidelity would be the disgraceful thing, and you wouldn't count an affair of the mind because it wouldn't get into the papers. . . . Now, Wagstaffe understands that. There's a streak of feminine in him. . . . I wouldn't give a damn for a man who hadn't got it. The hundred per cent. he-man is terribly disturbing and thrills me to pieces, but not, *not* for a permanency. I must have my spirit catered for.'

He looked at her grimly. Inside, he was hurling vulgar and colloquial abuse. ('Come off the roof, my girl! Chuck it! Cut it out!')

'... Haven't you told me that one ought to have a man at one's back? In the stage game? Well, it's happened, that's all.'

And so on, and so on. She had, he thought, forgotten their argument in the dressing-room, or selected suitable bits from it for their present talk.

Julian, it seemed, was to keep on the flat while the Wagstaffes set up house elsewhere. Oh, these double *ménages* never answered!

Vyvyan, being far-sighted and worldly . . .

James, walking away down the street, strained to remember at what point this jetsam of information had flowed in. She must have told one, or how did one know it?

Later, he realized that Vyvyan hadn't mentioned Amy Ida.

Tact, or Garsonianism?

Three weeks later he saw the announcement in *The Times* and *Post*. (That would be Julian's doing.) St. Martin's in the Fields. (A theatrical touch; probably Wagstaffe.) James sleuthed the proceedings methodically. A wavering advance Press, the kind in which the event is splashed in no-account papers and ignored in the steadies; or put in (four lines) under 'Actress to Wed Playwright . . . who is the author of . . .' Explanatory stuff put in because it was necessary. . . .

Some usher was creaking James to a seat in the none-too-full pews up in front, but one preferred—for many reasons—a place near the doors. In the pause, one vetted the congregation. The Albany Theatre represented fairly. A file of dowds, male and female, being shown into prominent places; one recognized Vyvyan's dresser . . . a light of the Votes-for-Women campaign in a green frieze ulster (come to make demonstration at the Obey clause?), some provincial, Howdlian faces. The minor poet, enjoying his profile extremely; a woman in nurse's grey cape and cap. A small, well-dressed figure wearing a spray of orchids, who was led to the front row and tripped over a hassock, exclaiming 'Dumm dis beesley tang! Whereiffer I move, dere it shall be!

And Amy Ida to be chief bridesmaid to all this.

The organ began.

Come then! I will prove thee with mirth.

. . . and there is nothing new under the sun

played Julian Garson, from Granville Bantock's *Vanity of Vanities*. He had meant to play some conventional Bach in which to drown grief.

Solomon knew. He'd tried music, and dancing girls and wine, and it was all no use. Ultimate good evaded him and cocked snooks at his wealth. One had known ease and comfort at long last, and Vyvyan was taken from one. Julian lifted his hands from the keyboard as the organist entered, stooping. One must go back to one's place to give Vyvyan away.

'You ought to hear that with a full choir and good basses,' he muttered to the organist, and began to wipe the tears which suddenly ran down his cheeks.

Vyvyan, coming down the aisle, smart in pearl grey chiffon coat trimmed with irrelevant chunks of chinchilla, a black velvet picture hat . . . and a cottage posy of primroses and daffodils in her hand; a wad of moss falling with a thud into the aisle; a loop of her hair (James almost timed it) already straying across her forehead. And then—one sensed it immediately—the real arrival. A stirring in the pews, heads turning as one; the sedate spread of that sheeplike mass contagion which makes of all audiences the valuable and worthless units that they are, and is the essential stultification of criticism and clear vision, for good or ill. The rear seats filling, even the organ notes seeming to swell (but that, of course, would be for the bride). Hissing whispers of query and answer.

‘Who is that lovely girl?’

‘It’s Amy Ida!’

‘Amy Ida’s here.’

Amy Ida, in a golden gown, Venetian cut, with deeply scalloped sleeves, a sheaf of lilies on her arm, a circlet bound round her hair.

‘Bit too old for her,’ commented James Marsh to James Marsh. He had forgotten to police her dress. Girls were usually to be trusted, there, and with her training in ornate effects . . . besides, she must pick some things up by herself—if no positive social solecism were involved. He had encouraged her to be Vyvyan’s bridesmaid. He watched his livelihood, falling into inevitably graceful poses, while Vyvyan and Wagstaffe said, ‘I will.’

Clear out now? No, better see it through. There was Julian to back up.

A flooding of St. Martin’s steps with congregation, a converging of sightseers, swelling at glint of a golden gown. (But it was sensible of Vyvyan to scrap white. She must be well over thirty, thought James, cultivating dispassion. White satin for altar-wear was indicative of a state of mind, blushing, conventionally protestant, unfledged. It wasn’t Vyvyan, long grown to full mental stature.)

Two Press photographers, and what the *hell* was she doing now? Click! And Vyvyan was stooping to a stray striped

kitten toddling hopefully round her feet. She had swept it into her arms.

'Andrew! We *must* take him home. I know he's wanting milk. But you can feel his ribs, my good man!' Vyvyan, radiant still, but already claimed by the brindled baby, her eye following the placing of the beast in the hired car. Vyvyan smiling at the world and the cameras a second too late as she straightened her body. A voice trumpeting: 'Oh, Gawd! Dearee, I shall take de cat if dat is all, an Tottee can play wiz ham!'

The caption over Vyvyan's stooping photograph in the *Evening Star* was marked 'Incident at Wedding.' But the print (named) of Miss Amy Ida was excellently clear.

CHAPTER XLVI

SOMETIMES, from the nursery window, the little Pamela Wilberforce would watch and memorize the arrivals at her sister's house. (Not sister, one was told. Step-sister. Steps were things you climbed up, and Amy was a grown-up lady, much, much taller. Perhaps that was it?)

Amy had lots of friends; faces off post cards—the shiny kind that were twopence—came to the front door. It was exciting to think that the faces coming into the 'rawing-room—sometimes, not often, coming an extra flight into the nursery—were worth twopence, nearly one's whole week's pocket-money. Some faces never came into the nursery at all until months and months of Amy having known them . . . they didn't guess that one knew them well by sight from window and banisters. Not often the banisters—Nanny was too quick.

One was brushed and brought down after tea, and there was a little silence at one's entrance that one learnt to expect, in time. Men handing things and drinking tea and yellow stuff in little glasses, and looking at Amy in a way one had, somehow, always known about, inside. . . .

Presents, that one didn't enjoy or get to love because . . . Some 'because.' One didn't know what.

Sometimes one was very quiet and good, hoping They'd tell Their secret, and when the jokes still went on, and the stupid things big people said to small ones went on, and the secret was still all over the room, then one wanted to hit out and kick, and so one said rude-awful things out loud, things one guessed to be awful. One was soaked in it, and one said things. Silly things, but you knew They'd hate it; Amy would hate it. One wanted to *see* Amy hating it.

'Where's my mummy?'

'I want to see her!'

'Why doesn't somebody kiss me?'

And They had another silence, and then They came forward to give kisses one didn't want, and Amy had laughed at the gentlemen and said, 'Perfect limelighter, isn't she?' which made one give a roar, because it was all hopeless.

Once, a gentleman, going downstairs, had said to the lady by his side: 'What a poisonous brat!' One had liked that. Here seemed a person who would tell one, and comfort. He said what he meant. . . .

Pamela thrust her head over the banisters and shrilled: 'Come *back*! I *like* you!' But they were talking, and clattering sunshades and sticks, and Jane was showing them out.

Uncle Jimmy Marsh. He mattered a lot. He was the nearest thing to the staircase-man. Amy was different with him; she didn't smile so much when he came, but listened, and said 'I see' and 'Must I?' and he said 'Yes.' And although one didn't understand their talk always, the secrets feeling wasn't in the room when Uncle Jimmy came. Amy called him Jimmy and James, but grown-ups could do things you mustn't. When you were Amy's age you were too old to have uncles, probably, or they were too old to be uncles? It was rude to ask ages, though people could ask you yours, and you said 'Nine.' But Uncle James asked no questions of that kind, or looked at you oddly, and he never kissed you. Pamela, thinking, had never seen him kiss anybody. She had said to him once, in a rude-awful moment: 'Why don't you kiss Amy?' And Uncle James said: 'I don't think it would amuse either of us.'

The child had run to the window and watched him go down the street, slowly for Uncle James.

There was Uncle Sam Gloucester, dimly and occasionally recollected. He never seemed to be about the house now.

Sometimes the stir at home—something always going on—excited one; it made home not like a house, but a shop or a theatre, and one forgot the secrets and snatched at whatever was happening. . . .

New faces (uncles?), come to photograph Amy. Gentlemen and young ladies with notebooks asking Amy questions, asking oneself questions and being so polite and afraid, that one's inside swelled with pride and one began to shout, and Nanny ran down and spoilt it all, just as one was going to tell them about the secrets and the staircase-man.

Being photographed with Amy made one fidget, but sometimes Amy put her warm, sweet-smelling arms round one, and one was thrilled, and adored her for as long as a week afterwards, so that meeting her about the house was an adventure, and one asked to be taken to the theatre where she was playing. A box, always, and being told not to call out, and Amy, walking about and talking to more ladies and gentlemen in another drawing-room, and saying things one didn't understand and wasn't interested in—too like home.

And occasionally tea with Amy in her dressing-room that one liked because one knew it; had driven with Amy and Uncle Jimmy to Maple and Story's to choose the primrose silk curtains and the shades for the lights, and to Mappin's for the silver toilet-set initialled 'A. L.' and somewhere else for the thick satin wallpaper of blue like forget-me-nots, to match the carpet.

Tea was 'telephoned down for' from the instrument on Amy's writing-table, and sent back if it was too weak and the cakes not nice, and all this with knocks on the door, and people coming and going, or, one noticed in time, trying to come and going. Mrs. Welbeck, the lady who dressed Amy like Nanny, murmuring to them at the door and closing it, and steps going away down the passages.

'Who was that, Mrs. Welbeck?'

'Oh, just a man tryin' to sell drorin's, Miss Ida.'

'What kind of "drorin's"?'

'What 'e'd done 'imself. Landskips and what not.'

'You'll have to speak to Mullins. What's he mean by letting people up here?'

'Expect he'd turned 'is back to boil 'is kettle.'

'Tell him he's not engaged to boil kettles.'

CHAPTER XLVII

JAMES MARSH, walking away from Amy's house, was thinking over the child's question. 'Why don't you kiss Amy?'

That particular complication would have been as tiresome as useful. At present he was working with one hand to develop a temperament in Amy, and with the other hand to suppress the slightest manifestation of one. Affairs were now, for her, definitely 'off.' The public wouldn't like it. It didn't match her work or her profile. Purity... the English Rose. . . .

It was being dead easy. He had got her where he wanted her, and later, secure, she could make mistakes all by herself—have lovers, even, and it wouldn't count against her. She offered a beautiful blankness, quite splendidly null, upon which he and the managers and producers worked like house-decorators. One to watch and one to pray—or rather, one for social tactics, one for gesture and intonation, and one to count her very steps, to time her every dramatic pause. It could be done, and they were doing it. The typescripts of her parts were a curious study.

Voice up here. Voice down, deep breath. Six steps rapid downstairs towards him, last three slow. Hand to cheek when X discovered in room. *Short* 'Oh!' of surprise. Slow smile at Y. *Acumen*, not *acumen*.

And little wave-length charts of inflexion for love-scenes.

Amy wouldn't deceive a midinette in Paris, but London accepted her, unable at first to forget that here was an Empress girl turned serious, and later she was carried along

on public credit, until they were unable, now, to disentangle her from the genuine article. She could now get away with practically any author, as far as audiences were concerned—except Shakespeare, which they all kept her right off, save for charity matinées, because Shakespeare was the Aunt Sally of Britain, about whose characters everyone had a theory, or thought they ought to have, which came to the same thing. Even the three dramatic critics who counted in England were unable to seriously floor her. And the public was thinking about her on the right lines . . . half the men in love with her. Good. But respectfully. Capital. Soon one's labour would be pure routine work.

Not that Amy would ever get to the true top. She was, and always would be hopeless in a roomful of clever men and women, except as a centre-piece and tinkler of gossip. But one had steered her round that corner by recommending earnest-student ways with the professors and slow smiles and silence for the epigrams.

Once she had complained to him, 'I'm so bored,' which he had leapt at, mistaking it, for once, for the dawn of temperament. He had since discovered that remarks of this nature usually meant that she wanted another go of smoked salmon.

The table. One didn't know everything oneself. One was, when all was said, just a plain old north-country dump. But Lady Stillminster had helped them there. She's a dangerous woman, but amenable to deference. Better to use her than be used by her. That poor Pamela kid . . .

She'd certainly helped to put her mother where she stood to-day. But, ah, the extra manoeuvring she had, for a year or so, let one in for!

Sometimes, in the spring, one actually and genuinely lamented one's inability to love Amy. So available. And one couldn't, and there it was.

Occasionally duty and pleasure dovetailed. One saw Vyvyan at Ida's place. There was, looked at from one angle, no keeping her out. . . .

PAMELA WILBERFORCE would always remember one day. They were, as usual, talking to Amy in the drawing-room. Lady Stillminster, whom one hated, and some gentlemen. And somebody said: 'Vyvyan Garson is . . .' something one didn't listen to, because one was caught by the name—Vyvyan Garson.

He would be tall and slim and daring, in Lincoln green, with a cap, pheasant-feathered, cocked over a merry eye.

Vyvyan Garson. Oh, decidedly. After that, one drew near and listened.

Vyvyan, it seemed, had a cottage in the country. (Of course. Sherwood Forest.)

'It won't do her any good to incarcerate herself miles from a station, surely?'

'Madness!'

'I'd always understood she hated the truly-rurals.' (That was Lady Stillminster, not looking pleasant.)

'Perhaps it's the husband?'

'Oh, Wagstaffe. . . .'

(So Vyvyan was a lady? That settled *her*. And Little John would have *liked* 'Wagstaffe.' 'Come, join me in a lusty bout of Wagstaffe . . .') The child lost interest and wandered away, but the talk went on.

'Didn't I hear that she was running a public-house?'

'What!'

'Oh, she's *quite* mad!'

'Well, I heard of some chaps went down there—motoring through—and La Garson gave them booze.'

'Amy?'

'I've never seen her place, Lady Stillminster. I'm quite curious!'

Lady Stillminster rose. 'Doesn't she—ah—rather live with some young man?'

'Surely not already?'

'Well, this is between us all, but a manager friend of mine rang her up late at night at her country place, and a man

answered the phone and said Vyvyan Garson's husband wasn't expected home that night.'

'Butler?'

'This man added, "Is he, Vyvyan?"'

'Amy?'

'I don't know, boys. I must really run down and look her up when I have a moment.'

'You're booked to me first, child' Lady Stillminster kissed her, proceeded downstairs. The men replenished drinks and grinned.

'I wish I had some news I wanted made public cheaply. Stilly's the original gramophone.'

'I understood La Garson was barmy about Wagstaffe, because no one can imagine why. He's a member of my club, and the premier bore. The art-of-my-wife stuff. I mean—he empties the room. He collared Alexander the other day and Alex had to have a sudden telephone call.'

'Good God! . . . I wonder how Wagstaffe likes all La Garson's young men?'

'Broke to it, I should think. She was always veh-ry much on those lines.'

'Shouldn't 've thought she was old enough to start that racket.'

They idly followed with their eyes the child who stirred from some corner and ran out of the room at an unheard sound.

She had seen Amy on the steps, waving the motor away. Jane was hurrying down to the kitchen. Someone was coming upstairs, alone. Amy's voice, calling to the stranger. 'Go on up! You'll find people in the drawing-room!'

The child hung to the banisters.

A large lady, tall, with yellow hair and eyes like the Genie of the Lamp, who threw down bag, chatelaine, parcels (why hadn't Jane taken them from her?) and held wide her arms.

'Darling. . . .'

One had untwisted one's shoes, and come to her.

'Have you forgotten me quite?'

'Yes.'

'That's honest, bless you!' One's hair being kissed, a warm cheek against one's own. 'But you won't forget me any more?' No. No more. From the stranger the secrets ran away.

Arms round one, and nobody taking photographs. . . .

The lady said, 'Well, it's like this. I'm a body name o' Garson——' And somehow that was funny, and one knew the lady was funny, and one leant against her and giggled.

CHAPTER XLIX

SOMETIMES Andrew Wagstaffe, torn between unfinished scripts and the country cottage Vyvyan had discovered she couldn't do without, wished that his wife would accept her coming motherhood and cut out the Magnificat business. They had rejoiced together with eyes and hand-fasting for weeks, but one couldn't exist at that pace. One's eye glanced aside, one's hand twitched for the quarto sheet, one's responses tended towards the lamentable yes-dear-yes class. The bond was there, and the essential joy. The rest was flummery. She couldn't see it in that way. Vyvyan, struck Biblical, was a thorough-pacer. And she had the Oriental's unreticence.

Theoretically one applauded it, but there are still one or two natural acts you don't perform in the middle of the road, and maternity might just as well be one of them, whereas Vyvyan was quite unconscious of her body, in that way.

This was all very well for the country and the cottage, but—one guessed and finally knew—London quite definitely didn't like it. Swelling contours and pre-natal symptoms quite firmly did not go with Tango Teas. Not that Vyvyan troubled them often. She seemed to prefer to huddle on a miscellany of overalls and clogs and clump about the garden, manuring this and that, and framing herself suddenly in the oak doorway, a Madonna in twill, her earthy hands enfolding a mass of primrose roots, in her pocket a peeping, new-hatched chick.

It was good fun, much of the time. You never knew what to expect. You mentally placed her at her weeding as you

settled to Act Three, and there she was, blowing her nose on a bandana.

'Andy, I've come to the conclusion that *The Midsummer Night's Dream* was taken from a Russian folk tale. Titania was probably Tatiana originally—oh, blast those hens!' And she was gone, shooshing. Or her habit of finishing a discussion in the teeth of any situation. Wagstaffe still shuddered at the milkman's unexpected knock.

'... and my theory is that you'll never solve the sex problem in the public schools—two pints please, Lithgow—until you either institute co-education, or allow the boys to show ordinary affection for each other—thanks, good morning—without being hounded for it.'

Andrew Wagstaffe began to be slightly less amused when he found out that the cottage had a name in the village not only bad but fantastically so. He discovered in himself profundities of hitherto unsuspected conventionality. It wasn't Vyvyan's habit of leaving her wedding-ring on the mantelpiece nine times out of ten, or the letters addressed to Miss Garson; that dilemma awaits every rustivating actress. It was probably her innocent tongue which scandalized important people (one woman had already cut her for expressing some sociological opinion in her drawing-room).

One began to see that, though the life of your wife is that fine thing, an open book, there must be reading for every taste. . . . Vyvyan's pages were strong meat for babes.

And to the cottage came a constant trickle of human mongrels. The cottage had once been an inn, and Vyvyan had insisted on keeping the sign over the porch. The Black Swan attracted many passing motorists, who drew in and wanted beer. Wagstaffe, pince-nez gleaming, would wrench himself from Act Two and, in a velvet jacket, hurry out to disperse them—and find them already in the kitchen admiring Vyvyan's pewter, china, grandfather clock, and photograph of Amy Ida. Then, via Miss Ida, it became a matter of seconds before this tall, yellow-haired country wench, hands in pockets, workman's handkerchief bound round her head, was identified as Vyvyan Garson, and the interested chorus rose that they never recognized her, but of *course* . . .

And Vyvyan, dispensing cider, would saunter to the gate to speed them on their way.

Wagstaffe had stopped all that, but not before it got into the papers and brought reporters round them, which might have been useful to Vyvyan had not her condition, instantly perceived and tactfully ignored by the Fleet Street men, made an attractive photograph impossible. Failing her, they 'took' the cottage, which, shorn of Vyvyan, made a singularly uninteresting study, being neither famous nor ancient.

Wagstaffe had stopped all that too, and Vyvyan had considered and instantly, eagerly, agreed.

'Harmful? Yes. I see what you mean. Oh, Andy, you see *everything!*'

He had been gratified, touched, admiring too of her careless abandonment of her career for the child's sake. Never a word . . . and the offers came, quite good ones. Vyvyan, a mug of cider in one hand and the receiver in the other, would parley with managers in the Haymarket, in Leicester Square, while a lark rose outside, drowning the replies, and a thrush primped over the brick floor.

But she couldn't—that was soon plain—live without humanity. Talk she would and talk she must, sometimes at the end of a hard day's writing, Wagstaffe realized. One was fighting against criticism of her. These over-close quarters seemed to foster it. . . .

She had roughly fitted up a spare room for casuals. It was seldom empty and never occupied by the right people. Tired militants resting after Holloway; on-the-makes, very full of themselves; young Terry Bevan, out of a job, with whom she sauntered down the garden, one arm round his shoulders, scolding, advising, paying his landlady, talking of the coming child. The villagers, peering over the hedge, did not always catch the conversation, but they had an excellent view of her arm round his neck and of her cigarette.

Worth-while people never came. Those who loved Vyvyan jibbed at the outside sanitation, and, for the rest, even she saw that you can't put a titled actor-manager in a loft with a crock of pickled eggs under the bed. 'But oh, God, how I'd adore to see Alexander negotiating them!' Vyvyan would

say. 'Or Tree. "Yeth, yeth. They have spoilt my byootiful pyjamours!"'

Her husband told her she dished her own chances of luring them down by the exaggerated word-pictures she let off at them as to the Wagstaffe-Garson *ménage*. 'Oh, come to our midden! And you shall wake up to find a hen in your bed—that's the best I can promise you, alas!' Or: 'Village life? Quite hopeless. Local society? Pardon *my* face slipping. All the women drink and the men are goats. And I can't blame them.'

And really the cottage wasn't as bad as that. It wasn't an absolute pig-sty, only a relative one, when he wanted to write and she wanted to dig, and the local woman failed them. Between the rounds it was charming, with the appeal of honesty. But her descriptions definitely alienated prospective guests, and, even if it weren't for that, there was a sufficiency of theatrical idlers, guests of Vyvyan's, to carry the matter . . . cads she had fed and warined in body and heart, tumbling over stiles, their suitcases full of unacted plays, going back to London to be funny about it all.

Quite often Wagstaffe had to leave her for days and nights together, to attend dinners, meetings, or rehearsals of his new play. Usually there was somebody with her, Terry Bevan or another. It was playing into the village's hands, but couldn't be helped. She would probably keep you ; Bevan in full work, swinging swill to the pigs and chopping firewood.

'Don't let her overdo things, Bevan.'

'I'll be a mother to her, Andrew.'

And Wagstaffe would depart mincingly over the fields. When the deuce would they bring the railway to the village?

Often the telephone rang as Vyvyan and Terry, supper cleared, sat honestly trying to learn how to knit from a woman's journal. The young man, crouched in shirt and shorts under the lamplight, would ponder, needles arrested, the directions.

'Look here, Garson, I think I begin to arrive about **this** purling business. You see—'

'Oh, answer the phone, my lamb.'

'That Miss Garson's cottage?'

'Yes.'

'Mr. Wagstaffe?'

'No. Mr. Bevan speaking. Mr. Wagstaffe's in town, not expected back to-night, is he, Vyvyan?'

'Oh.'

Two nights later Bevan triumphantly rounded the seat of Vyvyan's baby's first crawlers. Then, elbows on table, they talked.

'Oh, Terry, won't it be wonderful to be back at work again.'

'Rather. But, I say. Vyvyan, I do hope I've pulled my weight—earned my grub, and so on. I can't tell you what it's been to be here with you . . .'

'My dear, you've saved my soul alive. Oh, Terry, *pray* about Andy's play.'

'I do, I do!' And he did, for her sake. Wagstaffe was a decent chap, but not quite the amazement that Vyvyan, loving and happy, made out. Vyvyan not seeing straight about anybody was disconcerting. If *she* didn't keep the old flag flying, then no woman does, after marriage. Terry himself had lost his first clear vision of Wagstaffe's career. Andrew was now, more or less, a friend, having ups and downs. You hoped for him, and that was fatal. Sentiment was never business. If his crashes had been sensational it would have been easier, but, since *Peaceful Picketing*, Wagstaffe had port-holed strong drama and floated himself as a society playwright, and it didn't suit his style. Reasons: he had nothing to say, no pulpit and no sermon, and no experience of the types he was writing about, and no humour. He could be dry and delicate in drawing-rooms and foyers, but you must shout your nothings in the theatre, not whisper them. Wagstaffe in epigram was about as improbable a conjunction as a tortoise on a motor-lorry.

'Bed, Terry. Here's your candle. Just find mine.' A warm kiss on his cheek as they separated.

CHAPTER I

ENTERING week-enders would, at times, throw down magazines bought at stations, and Vyvyan, the guest sped, would read them. She often said: 'I only know my friends are being divorced by cooking on them.'

In this matter she learnt of the acquisition by Miss Amy Ida of The Pontoon, Warlock-on-Thames. The Pontoon was, of course, not a pontoon at all, but a large two-storied house with balconies, a sunk garden, a boat-house, and a tennis lawn.

Drawn up to the kitchen-table, Vyvyan and Terry Bevan pored over the brown photogravures which illustrated the announcement. Amy, in white silk pleated tennis-skirt, leaning against the net; Amy, pouring tea under a giant striped umbrella for three men and (right) Lady Stillminster; Amy, a Peter Pan in leather jerkin and breeches, digging. At this Vyvyan laughed long and huskily.

'Aren't they incredible, Terry? Do look! She's got the wrong foot on the spade and she doesn't know one end of a potato from the other.' Then she became thoughtful. 'She must have *pots* of money. How they do it I *cannot* imagine. I've never touched more than fifty pounds a week in my life.'

He said: 'She's getting one hundred and fifty pounds. And a percentage on the receipts. Chap in the theatre told me so. Vyvyan, why aren't *you* getting that? You can wipe the floor with her.'

'I know. Ask me another, Terry. I'm not commercial, you know. But when the heir has arrived I'll try to do something about it. Oh, I *loathe* talking money. One oughtn't to have to.'

'Andrew?'

'Couldn't. As it is he's doing all he can for me, beating the big drum about La Garson to managers when he meets 'em.'

Bevan shuddered. Andrew, he knew, was already an incipient club bore on the subject of his wife; the button-holing (certainly in one case) had had the effect of convincing the victim that all was not well with Vyvyan Garson. . . . Andrew

Wagstaffe hadn't a very light touch here, either. Too earnest. Bevan said curiously: 'You are a pal of Amy Ida's?'

'Oh, Terry, I love that child! Can't think why. I can see, oh, clearly! that she's a flimsy person, and no mind. Second-rate. Second-rate artist, too. They're doing their best to ruin her among the lot of 'em, always have, though they *have* made her out of mud and tea-leaves. But I often feel she's my child, even,' she tapped her body, 'more than this little rabbit here. The mothers got mixed, and Amy had the wrong one, that's all. And then, you know, there *must* be something of me in her. You can't train 'em as babies and stuff 'em with your ideas without leaving something of you in them. To me, those mental things are so infinitely more significant than mere physical ones.'

Bevan, uninterested, at a loss, bent to the pictures again.

'And that child of hers . . . ?'

'Her step-sister.'

'Tush! Her child, Garson. They're as like as two pins. My dear, every one knows it. Wonder who the father was?'

'Terry, one of my reputations is for being the most tactless woman in London, but I'm not going to blow the gaff on that.'

'Ah . . . seen the kid?'

'A pet! Oh, such a darling! One can't keep one's hands off her. . . . Terry, you must and shall meet them both. And so must Andy.'

'Ever asked her down here?' He said it more as a joke, but her eyes lit.

'I did drop a fly over her last week, when I was up for the day buying dish-clouts and whatnots. My dear, you'll be prone at her feet the minute she comes in at the door, and fat old La Garson will say, "Bless you both!"'

'Well, old darling, you *could* powder your nose even here, you know, and cream your face. You aren't giving your skin a dog's chance.'

'But nobody sees me except the eye o' Gord, and dears like you and Andy, who love me at my worst.'

She telephoned to Amy Ida. Her pleasure and elation at

being accepted worried and exasperated Terry profoundly, and he went into the garden where, for two hours, he savagely tugged at weeds.

For the next two days they attempted to convert the cottage into the country place of a leading lady.

'Our tiger-skin, my lad. Hast time to flay and cure the cat?'

'Whatever one does, this kitchen goes on looking like the first act of *High Tea*.'

'Hah! Enter Maggie Shute with shawl drawn close, by gum.'

'Am I to be the oldest inhabitant, the village idiot, or your lover?'

'Your pyjamas aren't illicit-looking enough for that, Terry.'

'Then oi be gaffer, "minding the time."'

'D'you think they sell bath-salts at the shop?'

'She'll bring her own. My God, if she brings a maid we're destroyed!'

It had given her a nervous energy that Bevan honestly tried to check. You couldn't be everywhere at once, and entreaty was no use. She listened with half an ear, her feet already twitching to be off on the next job. Even meals went by the board, and there set in a régime of boiled eggs and bread and cheese, and hitherto she had been a stickler for punctuality and sane food. He guessed at pallor under her country pink.

'Terry, these curtains are awful. I've got a spare set. Get me the step-ladder.'

'Not much! I'll hang 'em myself.'

'Angel.'

'Only I must go and feed the pigs first.'

'Right.'

He tramped down the garden, pails clanking.

And after all, she was at the job, unable to wait. He saw her dragging the ladder into the spare room, damned, and started back to the cottage. He heard the crash as he reached the path, and ran.

Vyvyan, lying on the floor, the ladder across her body.

'I've—done—it this—time—Terry—my lad. Andy!'

Her son, a seven-months child, was born that night and died at dawn.

CHAPTER LI

'MOVE along, there! Move along. Keep moving. You would, would you?' The invalid wheel-chair propelled by the cripple was jostled. Some man, sadistic for the love of hearth and home, unscrewed the nuts, disabling the chair, which overturned the frail occupant. She fell on to the pavement to be trampled by a hundred feet.

'My God, you cads!' James Marsh crimsoned with fury. It was an open secret that the Home Office had given the police *carte blanche* to deal with suffragettes as their tempers might dictate. He held no brief for the lunatic display, yet if that was being a militant, the papers had suppressed this side of it. He would have liked to drive the car he sat in into the broken lines of mounted police milling in Parliament Square. Even a gossip writer had written that there were some things you didn't do to women.

Amy Ida, at his side, whimpered.

'You can't come round this way. Tell your man to turn. Better cut over Westminster Bridge. They're getting very ugly. And wait in China Walk, Lambeth. We've sent two Cabinet Ministers there already.' The inspector, still civil at the size of Amy's car, waved them on as his cap was knocked askew. The Square hummed like a well-staged crowd. There were cries. Recovering, Marsh picked out faces, watching to see what suffragettes did: what one had always asserted they did.

An ugly little woman being frog-marched off, ludicrously, ignobly, her face startled but unprotesting; a woman chained to a railing, making a speech, quite business-like, but silent as a film, two feet away, smiling at points her lips had evidently made. A clergyman uncovering as he saw her colours. A band of shouting factory girls delighted, and suddenly panicking, their ragged chorus, 'Ev'ry nice gurl loves a s'iler!' drowned as they were scattered, screaming. A healthy young woman in riding kit, moving on her mount, decorated

with W.S.P.U. rosettes, grinning. 'Hounds, gentlemen, please! Hounds, please!' and she played hunting-calls upon her horn. Illogically the crowd in her immediate vicinity cheered her. Amazing people, the English. Flighty and incalculable audiences. She moved off down Whitehall, tooting the 'Gone away.'

And openings in the crowd as the prison-fodder was dragged forward. A stone cracked on the slowly advancing Black Maria. Another rent in the heaving, cursing mass, and Sylvia Pankhurst, looking like the early portraits of Queen Victoria, with her oval face and curtained hair, emerged, distributing leaflets. By her side, half her hair down, ran Vyvyan Garson.

Marsh crashed down the car window, shouted 'In here! In here!' Heard with part of his ear Amy's cry, 'Oh, don't! Oh, please!' He saw Vyvyan deliberately create a diversion, snatching her hat from a factory girl and singing to the crowd. In these seconds her leader slipped away as Vyvyan, turnip-white, clung to—of all people—a policeman, from whom she was about to be wrenched by the clergyman until the latter realized a friend in the grinning constable.

Marsh's mind, trained to anticipate and prophesy, was saying, 'This is a very much bigger thing than it looks.'

He slewed round upon the mass of fur and crushed lilies of the valley which represented Amy Ida.

'Look out of the window,' he commanded.

'I can't. They'd throw something at me—at us.'

'Tah.'

He had hoped to provide a warming treat for the men, and side-track them from Vyvyan that way—a reminder that all was still well with the mad world. Eve to the Adams. Christians to the lions. In any case, the car moved forward then, and Vyvyan between her clergyman and her Bobby had seemed safe.

Part of his mind thanked heaven that Amy Ida had not been seen. Friends and foes were difficult to sort in that mêlée . . . and that particular form of publicity would do her no good at all. Perhaps, later, if the feeling rose higher, became (as it would) more universal, he would see that she

became a non-active member of the Actresses' Franchise League.

Vyvyan? But Vyvyan was headed for the devil in any case. It was painful to watch.

Since the loss of her baby she had emerged from her long illness herself, accentuated. Didn't they say that women only scuffled for the vote when their personal lives had gone agley? Because they were sex-thwarted, or sex-perversed, or merely out for a lark? In Vyvyan's case these scenes that aged her face and that she engaged in—hating them—were, if James knew her, a random blow struck in the general cause of female happiness. Her own reward (he had heard it once or twice) was loss of nerve, sharpening of temper, impulsive errors of judgment. And she couldn't afford to lose her temper. Her position was too insecure.

She was in work, of course, working like a black, giving performances that swung between the magnificent and little losses of memory. He clamped his teeth as he remembered her first known slip, re-saw the sweet, fearful turn of the yellow head to the prompt corner . . . recognized the fright in the crooked eyes. At this crisis she needed all the reassurance she could lay her hands on. Wagstaffe's sentimentalizing was no good. She wanted stinging, humorous bracing. Julian, old, loving, and anxious, was no good either. All these men, dependent on her for love or money or sympathy, were no use. Vyvyan needed (and wouldn't admit it) to herself depend. Self-reliance is all very well, but too much liberty of action is almost worse than not enough. Her snap-judgments seemed to her, at the time, infallible; she would seldom admit to being in the wrong. And she conveyed that she believed Wagstaffe infallible, and he wasn't. Together they confirmed each other's weakness. Andrew Wagstaffe (and not in one's own opinion alone) was drifting into the squeezed-lemon class. That drawing-room comedy of his which was produced while Garson lay in hospital, her convalescence retarded through fret and fume at missing the first night, and through the morning papers, was a polite failure. Pinero was doing it all supremely, securely, on his own ground, 'the county,' just as Robertson and his teacups had

done it before him. Wagstaffe was losing his nerve and preying on Vyvyan's, who, God knew, had no reserves to spare.

Vyvyan had said, with that new sub-acidity which was growing on her, 'It would *pay* managers to pay us to keep out of the theatre.' Some of them were keeping her out, though she must never know it. Over whiskies they would blow off steam at the Garrick, seeing in James Marsh a fellow-member . . . useful frame of mind, that, on any other topic.

'I wouldn't have her in my theatre again if she was the last actress left standing.'

One had hoped one's face wasn't whitening as one said 'Oh?'

'No. We've had nothing but trouble and strife from the beginning of the run, and really, Marsh, after all, she doesn't cut *all that* ice. Wanting this, wanting that. *I'm* the leading lady in this theatre . . . it can't be done.'

'You . . . admire her work?'

'Oh, she can do "ne stuff. But she's unreliable.'

He'd said it. One had ordered another drink.

Vyvyan, with no conception of timing her effects, was evidently playing up the dramatic Old Harry too late. And one sat and made appropriate grunts to all this because one was 'a fellow-member.'

' . . . and I wish somebody would drop the lady a hint that we're all dog-sick of her husband (he's Wagstaffe, the playwright, you know). She brought him on a lead as usual to rehearsal the other day, and while I was considering some point, Garson says: "Let's ask Andy. He *always* knows." Let's ask An—Orrrrr.' The actor-manager placed a portion of his face in his tumbler. He withdrew it to remark, 'Wagstaffe is quite perfect and absolutely omniscient. If you accept that, you'll get on capitally with him and her. Poor chap! He's very much Mr. Vyvyan Garson.'

Well, that at least wasn't true. But one couldn't fight it. If this was what was being said and thought, it was too late to do anything, even if she'd listen. Even the wrong labels stick.

And there was the business about Pamela.

The car drew up at the house; wearily James Marsh got out and assisted at the assorted rites which accompanied the dislodgment of Amy Ida.

CHAPTER LII

FOR many days Vyvyan Garson was not seen about the Ida house, but (Marsh had satisfied himself upon that point) there were no gaol or bail aftermaths of the Parliament Square scrimmage.

Pamela had a habit of asking for and after her at all times, these days. Now he came to think of it, she had never displayed a similar urgency about any of Amy's crowd. He had remarked on it to Amy; she had, between the hairdresser, masseuse, and dressmaker, seemed quite pleased. It was all very nice and pretty. One sincerely hoped that the child was assuaging Vyvyan for the loss of her own.

When without claims of work or rehearsal, Vyvyan seemed to be always at the house, Amy said. James had long ago, as he put it, released Amy on parole, and was now at liberty to absent himself to keep a merely watching brief over Amy and her career. He was out of touch with the Garson complication.

He had, confounded, picked up the first clue at the club, when tea-ing with a comedian.

'Hullo, Jimmy! So Amy Ida's sold her encumbrance to the baggage man?'

'Come again, Webly.'

'They always hate having girls that date 'em, and I suppose that child must be getting on, now.'

'Webly, what is all this?'

The comedian roused. 'What? Oh, Vyvyan Garson was raising Cain about the girl at m'wife's At Home, last week. Said the way she was neglected was a scandal—no, a sin against the Holy Ghost. Let us be accurate.'

'Vyvyan Garson said that?'

'I say, have I put my number nine hoof in it?'

'Not at all.' Marsh's hands clamped the chair arms. He spoke very carefully. 'La Garson has rather got hold of the

wrong end of the stick. You see, I know Miss Ida and Pamela pretty well.'

'Oh, I see. Well, Miss Garson evidently thinks so. She held forth for about ten minutes.'

'Ah?'

You mustn't contradict in the indignant manner, lest rats be smelt. Neither must you put in a plea for either future discretion or public retraction, lest suspicions really be confirmed... there are few weapons against theatric rumour. James whipped out about the only one.

'Well, well... if a large and airy nursery, a vanful of toys, a competent nurse, and regular meals constitute neglect, then Garson is right.'

The comedian lost interest. The question was: what to do about it? Tell Amy? Not much good. This was an affair for the principals... Vyvyan's flat? But Julian would be there. The cottage? That would probably let one in for Wagstaffe, who would be an active hindrance. It was damnable. And just as one was arranging the business of launching Amy into management and wanted all one's wits about one. Vyvyan wasn't playing, at the moment, so there was not even the dubious refuge of the dressing-room. That left Amy's house. Amy was rehearsing.

'No thanks, Jane. I'll show myself up.'

No need to step softly, after all, for shrieks of childish laughter were coming from the drawing-room. The sofa, barricaded by chairs, draped to resemble a theatre-box; Pamela in the enclosure, a pair of scissors at her eye for lorgnette. At the far end of the room Vyvyan Garson, being old music-hall stars, pedalling a non-existent bicycle (you almost saw the bloomers).

'h'Disy, h'Disy,

h'Give me yore answer do—er...'

trolled Miss Garson. Then, quite suddenly, 'Now for a bit of drawing-room comedy. This is high art, dearie, very high and refined, and a little Rude in a Nice way. The Unimportance of being Wild.' She threw a drape from some chair round her. 'Ow, Arthur, has it reely come t'this? I sometarms

think if I had ever had a child we shouldn't 've drifted apart. . . .'

Pamela gave a screech. 'Oh, Vyvyan, it's Amy! It's Amy! Oh, how lovely!'

Fascinated always by the good thing, James lingered in the doorway, but at that he came forward.

'It's Uncle Jimmy! Come and join me in Box A, Uncle Jimmy. The attendant will show you. Ask for Miss Wilberforce.'

'Hullo, Pamela! I want to talk to Miss Garson alone.'

Watching, he saw the disconsolate child turn for orders to Vyvyan, could have slapped Vyvyan for her 'Must she really go, Jimmy?'

'Sorry.'

They were alone. Vyvyan unwound the drapery from her body.

'Am I in disgrace, Jimmy?'

'Can't we both sit down? . . . Look here, Vyvyan, it's no use dodging all round the point. It boils down to this. That unless you can undertake to keep your tongue off Amy and the child, I shall have to recommend her to ask you to stop coming here.'

'You're not serious? What d'you mean?' she whispered. Then, her anger flaming, 'How *dare*—'

'Please, please. You didn't mean to. I'm sure, but you have been circulating a most damaging rumour about Miss Ida. It's already got round to the club.' He hoped he wasn't looking as ill as she. 'You have said to a roomful of people that Amy Ida neglects Pamela.'

She seemed relatively relieved.

'Well, doesn't she? Doesn't she?'

'Certainly not. And if she did, it's not, excuse me, your business. Haven't you any loyalty?' He added, his voice shaking at the look on her face, 'Couldn't you foresee the danger? Don't you know the stage by now?'

'I wasn't alluding to *physical* neglect, James.'

'No doubt. But it's all the same to them.'

'Oh, you materialists! Can't you visualize a neglect that isn't a matter of starvation or dirt?' She was raging now,

pacing up and down, fist flung high and shaking. 'The very fact that you are satisfied about Pamela shows that you know nothing of her life, nothing. Even I never guessed her until she—until she'—her voice cracked grotesquely—'began to love me. Even a woman like Amy might have put up a better show at being a mother.'

'One moment. I had always thought you—I don't want to pry—loved Amy.'

She stared at him, dazed, realizing what she had said.

'I did. It took a lot of killing. Two things killed it. One was the day I realized she didn't care a rap for me.'

'Vyvyan, I've known that for years.'

'Then why didn't you tell me?'

Before the preposterous illogic of the attack he was dumb.

'Is it ever much use to warn you of anything, Vyvyan?'

'Oh, she's what you've made her among the lot of you. She's been drilled, drilled, drilled all her life until she has no spontaneous feeling left, nor an emotion that isn't contrived. She was so lovely . . . so sweet . . . and the sacrifice of her isn't even a genuine contribution to decent art. She's completely and utterly ignorant of the fineness of half the lines she speaks in the theatre. . . . Have you ever watched her face when some abstract discussion is going on? How she is instantly a blank, and closes up?'

'Admitting all that, can't we keep to Pamela?'

'Pamela is the final thing that killed Amy for me. Oh, she's got plenty of toys—conscience money for the love she isn't getting—and they don't beat her, but she told me in a perfectly matter-of-fact way the other day that she never had birthday treats nor romps with Amy. Ever seen Amy being photographed? But of course you have. You, dear James, gave this dramatic star to London. I was forgetting. She puts her arms round Pamela, one, two, three—hold that, Miss Ida—then, click! and her arms drop. . . . And if that is her life now, what will it be at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, when they need all the affection and understanding—' She was sobbing now, her face a wreck.

'And you consider you are solving the problem by slander-

ing Amy Ida? It is slander, you know. What you said is distinctly actionable.'

'You will take action?'

'No.'

'Oh, do let me persuade you to, James! It would only ruin me financially, you know. I haven't saved much.'

'The thought doesn't alarm you?'

'I'm not frightened where Pamela is concerned. It'd be worth it to ventilate the case. My Christ! I'd tell 'em all some home truths! Including that girl I know who was sacked from the paper she'd worked on for six years to make room for a set of articles on "Allure and the Toilet," by Miss Amy Ida. (Did you write 'em, by the way?) Six years, my man. Five guineas a week wiped out, and Amy gets fifty, *and* her stage salary.'

'If you're only going to rave, Vyvyan . . .' (But one hadn't absolutely bargained for them sacking the girl.)

'It's an iniquitous thing, and it's going on all over Fleet Street. Everybody knows it and nobody says anything. Oh, I hate you all!'

'Well, I'm rather hating you, for the moment,' he admitted handsomely. An awful thought struck him.

'Vyvyan, have you told Pamela she is Amy's child?'

'No. That isn't my business. But her happiness is, since it seems to be nobody else's.'

She had gone to the window, trying to hide her face, as a boy does in grief. Under her sombrero of pearl-coloured felt a wisp of pale hair trailed. A part of James hurried to it to curl it round his finger and kiss it; the major part of him stood there saying things that stung. Indeed, he was exasperated.

'And about this business. I am sure you will see with your very fair mind that it is best to come here less often.'

'Damn fairness!'

'Well, then, aren't you too proud?'

'I'm not proud at all where Pamela is concerned.'

'In that case, I shall have to recommend Amy to send her to a boarding-school.'

She slewed round. 'You? Recommend? Are you her lover?'

'Come, come, Vyvyan, you can say far more amusing things than that.'

'I know you aren't. Oh, what's it matter?' She sat down abruptly. 'Why does one suffer like this? . . .'

'Must you use a steam-hammer every time you want to break an egg?' Vyvyan was Vyvyan, but business was also business. 'May I know what you mean to do?'

'God, Marsh, haven't you any heart at all or only a Press cutting? Are you offering me a choice of thick soup or clear, or the alternative of keeping or losing a child's love and confidence? I'll play fair with you, if only I knew you'd do the same with me.'

'I can see you are in a highly nervous state——'

'——Meaning I've been insulting. I'm sorry, but you successful business people are so jolly slippery. Well, I'll try to behave myself.'

He smiled grimly. 'You wouldn't believe the extra work you've let me in for, Vyvyan. A whole fresh batch of photos of Amy and Pamela to take and issue—there's a splendid cue for you!'

She shook off the bitter chaffing. 'At least I can have her down at the cottage.'

'Sorry, Vyvyan. If you do that, just now, it'll lend colour to your story.'

CHAPTER LIII

FROM the first, Julian Garson was careful to accept invitations to the Black Swan less often than they were offered.

Andrew Wagstaffe and Vyvyan's father agreeably surprised each other, except on those occasions when Julian wanted to play for hours upon the cottage piano and his son-in-law wanted to write. Then the artists veered between glaring matches, scrupulous politeness, and concessions in the knee-breeched and rapiered manner. But however the two men stood with regard to each other, they waited tacitly upon Vyvyan's mood. Sometimes father and husband would, by looks they hoped they had not exchanged, convey a grow-

ing unease. Andrew (if Julian could see it, why didn't Vyvyan?) would flinch before her occasional puttings of the situation into nutshells.

'Well, we seem to be making a pretty fair mess of our lives.'

'If Andy's plays were in demand——'

'Cavendish? He'd never dream of making me an offer. He hates me.'

'When I'm out of a job I'm out for months at a time, but if Amy Ida's show flopped she'd have all the telephones in London ringing.' Remarks all true, all painful. It was affecting Andrew's temper, putting him off his stroke, Julian saw. It was tearing from him that protective veil of delusion which sensitives profoundly need. Julian had long abandoned encouragement and admiration, it brought him nothing but impatience and derision. There was something gone from Vyvyan these days. One would suggest that a week or so in London would do her good; then Wagstaffe would peer at the acumen of the amateur, and Vyvyan would angrily assert that she couldn't afford it. Dresses, dinners, taxis. Had Julian thought of that? And she could afford it. It was absurd. She had put by several hundreds.

Burying herself. Was that the idea? And nothing would move her. But surely well-known actresses had country places and weren't quite so drastic about them?

Or one would hint that a change into something pretty for supper might induce a brighter outlook, and be answered with toots of mockery, 'My good man, *have* you mistaken this for the Carlton?' And, in leggings and sweater, she would proceed to mix the food for the fowls.

She kept a wholesome table, but, as she would say to anyone who happened to be at the cottage, 'Andy's lost all *his* money and we're living on my savings.' On these occasions Julian thanked God that he himself was over seventy and that something would no doubt carry him off before long.

That morning Wagstaffe had broken years of reserve and loyalty and let fly to his father-in-law about it, hysterically. Cumbered with one's own loyalty, responses were amazingly

difficult; somebody was bound to be hurt or angry anyway. . . Vyvyan was glad to share her all with Andrew . . . she wasn't criticizing him . . . and, the explosion over, Wagstaffe was in a dilemma for phrases. It *was* true, and he *was* living on her, and to object to a situation by which you profited being known was merely ungenerous. But he still felt flayed.

Julian meditated the situation, enjoying the June sun in the garden, his deck-chair set under the bush with its pretty purple tassels, whose berries looked so good and were, Vyvyan — unaccountably country-versed — assured him, highly poisonous.

She had done wonders, after all. The flat, and this amazing quiet. From nothing — this sanctuary. Couldn't one look at it that way?

Somehow, one couldn't. Vyvyan, one's daughter, had put herself in the running and accustomed one to regard her from the angle of the other crack runners. And her pace was flagging, and nobody would tell one why. One got no nearer a plain answer in spite of her delusively frank utterances. And she wasn't looking well, and one daren't say so, or beg for doctor's counsel. You never, in point of fact, quite knew when you had put your foot in it. . . .

At supper Julian said timidly, 'Have you ever thought of putting on one of Andrew's plays yourself?' and waited for applause or colloquial revilings.

Vyvyan didn't even go through the form of considering the idea.

'You talk as if putting on plays was as simple as putting a plate on the table, my man.' But there was speculation in her eye, and in Andrew's. They began to discuss it, brusquely, as it sounded to Julian, from the point of view that it was out of the question.

'I *could* put two hundred and fifty pounds into it at a pinch. It would help to put me back where I ought to be. . . . Which one would we do, Andy? Not *Peaceful Picketing*. Nor a comedy.'

'*High Tea*. It was the popular one.'

'Enter Maggie, shutting through the door, tha knows.'

Wagstaffe curtly took butter. He hated jokes about his work.

'Oh, Andy, how marvellous if we could pull it off! Question is: who'll put up the rest of the money? Anybody know any financiers willing to back slightly *manquée* actress who brings bad luck wherever she goes—'

Julian got up and retreated to the far end of the kitchen. Vyvyan failed to take the hint.

'—and put rocky playwright on his feet again?'

Julian dropped a match into the fireplace.

'What about that Baroness something you knew in Howdlie?'

'Genius! I'll write to her. I haven't answered her last two letters. What a beast I am! *Can* one? I must. It might save the whole bag of tricks. And, after all, I'm offering her an investment.'

Julian, fluttered at his suggestion's adoption, wondered a little why the idea had not occurred to Vyvyan. Her attitude to her career these days seemed to be one of obstinate pride. 'I know what I can do. If good acting is wanted they'll come to me. It's not my job to tout round for work.'

And they weren't coming to her, much. It was demoralizing her, Julian knew. She had disarmed one utterly the next minute by putting her arms round one's neck and crying, like a child, against one's cheek, 'It's making me so *bad-tempered*. I'm foul to you, and I'm getting on Andy's nerves.'

An hour later she would embarrass every one by allusions to her ability. 'When I had all London at my feet, at the Albany.' 'Oh, he was my bonded slave.' 'I'm the best comedy actress in England, and the best tragedienne but one.'

All true, Julian remembered. Open house at the flat, dinner-parties, invitations to house-parties from well-known society names. Clever men, as much attracted by Vyvyan's brain as by her personality. It had been. And somehow it was not.

THE reply from the Baroness, a likeable mixture of reckless friendship and native caution, caused Vyvyan suddenly to emerge from the wood-shed in a Lanvin creation, at which apparition Wagstaffe was tactlessly astonished. Julian, who knew his Vyvyan, laughed aloud, and, trotting to the piano, celebrated with music. He said that only Bach's *Kyrie Eleison* was worthy of the cut, 'long, rich, and dignified.' Vyvyan recklessly embraced him, and Wagstaffe wished these Garsons weren't quite so childish. But he was relieved. Vyvyan had been running to see!

Later, she strolled with her men to the gate, and, raising her face to the yellow moon, declaimed deeply, 'Oh, I could sleep with a tramp on such a night as this!'

The talk veered to *High Tea*, and stayed there. The producer? Oh, Andy, of course (besides, we couldn't afford a well-known man). 'My dear, you must take me through it again. Oh, Julian, *why* aren't you an actor? I wish we could get Myra for the show, but the poor dog's too busy teaching half-wits to *listen* to me, bless her stout bosom! Oh, Andy, never let me get a bosom.'

Together, for there was no one else to do it, they drafted announcements for the papers, and secured—a stroke of luck—a small theatre, the Duke of Gloucester's. To get their advertisements arranged and were appalled at the cost, so that the cottage rang with outcries. And then began the stream of letters from disengaged actors, old friends, acquaintances, people who had had the pleasure of meeting Miss Garson once at the So-and-so's.

She read them all, deaf to remonstrance. The timidity of the veiled appeals made her eyes wet.

Wagstaffe took fright; a quarrel was barely averted.

'Look here, this fellow's no use, Vyvyan. He's much too old by now.'

'Then give him a smaller part. Oh, I say, Andy, here's poor old Apperley! We must have her with us.' And so on. They would, Wagstaffe reflected, be cheap, and nobody mattered but Vyvyan.

She didn't see it in that light; had a perverse flash of business which made her take the line that 'it wouldn't do us any good if it got round that we were doing it on the cheap.'

'We've got to cut corners, Vyvyan. And the Duke's a small house, remember.'

'Oh, Andy, what should we all do without you! But I can't underpay them! I know what it is to swot for seven pounds a week.'

'That chap, James Marsh . . . he'll tell us.'

She smote the table, but he was startled far more by the look on her face.

'On—no—account, Andy. Promise me, please. Even if you meet him at the club.'

'But I tell you, he'd be most useful——'

'I won't have Marsh inside my theatre on any account whatsoever.'

It was Julian who worried over that. Jimmy was evidently one of Vyvyan's rare reticences. Who could hope to keep upsides with stage ins and outs? Now one came to think of it, Jimmy no longer looked one up at the flat. . . .

'This Hamish Dene, Vyvyan. Wasn't he at the New Arts?'

'What? Hamish? Has he written m? God, what a score! The first I've ever had. Show me.' She took the letter. *Perfectly* pleased with himself, as usual. Asking, but not appearing to. Very careful to let me know he has an offer for America. No, thank you, Mr. Dene. Kah! To think I kissed him and liked it!

'I remember him now. He'd be admirable as the elder Ransom.'

'Nothing doing, Andy.'

In the gloom, Wagstaffe scanned them all as they gathered on the stage, exclaiming, recognizing each other. One had airily dismissed as being too old those whom Vyvyan had, after all, engaged. But one had forgotten to measure up Vyvyan herself.

Perhaps it was the lights, but somehow she no longer looked the part. Here was a larger Maggie, fuller in the face—a peony, not a freesia, with fine lines which weren't there before.

Her physical development would take away the value of her speeches. The whole point of one's irony lay in defiance from a pale-faced factory snippet, but who could expect other than successful defiance from this Amazon? Her figure was still beautiful, but she had an indefinable air of maternity which left you feeling that the child within Maggie was only one of many living. She could have knocked Ransom down with a push.

That *damu* gardening.

Reassurance came with the sound of her voice. That was unforgettable, unchanged. But . . .

He tiptoed over to Madame Raine, invited by Vyvyan to the rehearsal.

'Miss Raine, you played with my wife in this, in Howdlie. Is she playing it differently? Or am I imagining it?'

'You hear it, too?'

'Then what's your opinion, between ourselves?'

'Vyvyan is playing a Maggie who's had a child, and lost it—'

Myra Raine, realizing the personal application, stopped, flushing.

'No, no, no. Go on. I understand.'

'I mean, she's showing us a woman from whom something of supreme importance has been taken. You feel that she has no real hope of bearing Ransom's child. Her playing is wrong because it's utterly forlorn. This Maggie is fated to lose two children. . . . Oh, what a version! (I've wept myself to a sop.) But how wrong!'

Perhaps Vyvyan would act herself into her original reading? One dare not allude to her work to her face. She was keyed up, had been involved in endless business details that no leading lady should be expected to cope with. And quite unconsciously, Wagstaffe soon saw, she was undermining his authority at rehearsals. Discipline became impossible to maintain unless one had an open quarrel with her in public, which would upset her so that she'd be useless for at least the rest of the day. The trouble was her cursed friendliness. At first one thought this promiscuous mingling with the company was an ignorance of theatrical values, improbable though

that seemed. Later, one saw that it was Vyvyan the hostess, the friend, the worldling that had taken charge of her. This was a woman moving among guests—putting people at their ease—a fatal line with stage employees. It had the inevitable and immediate effect of losing her prestige, respect, and obedience. What was the use of the producer being a rock of ages in the midst of this garden-party? Vyvyan's outlook was that of the gentlewoman who everlastingly looks with chivalrous compassion and apology upon a debtor; who believes that she is eternally beholden to those to whom she is paying a wage.

Magnificent, but emphatically not war.

'Miss Garson, please.'

And Miss Garson, discovered deep in talk with the juvenile lead, listening *en égal* to his bumptious and unfledged notions, or chaffing somebody else as she sat eating a fourpenny ice on a dress-basket, or allowing the mother of the child who played Maggie's daughter to monopolize her. Vyvyan never could terminate a conversation authoritatively. And they took advantage. Who wouldn't? Came late and later to rehearsals, stayed away half an hour beyond the time allowed for luncheon, were even rocky on their lines. And would stroll in at three o'clock to find their leading lady patiently waiting for them. Punctuality, to her, was not an affair of politic manœuvre, but quite simply a matter of common civility.

This at least one could hint to her. And she agreed, and was indignant, declaiming and practising on one the rebukes she would administer, and, when it came to the point, she stood there, sweetly, gravely, courteously accepting their careless apologies, and never a cross word.

Long before the *première*, Wagstaffe had lost his nerve badly with suppressed exasperations, and possibly the heavy July weather. One hoped it was the weather. If Vyvyan flopped they would have to carry it all back to the cottage and there would be hell to pay for ever. . . . One had already accepted the principle of private Vyvyan-criticism. It was at once a safety-valve and a misery. One was too run down to control it, knew it was growing on one.

ON THE opening night Vyvyan Garson's taxi crawled with agonizing sloth through a press of men and women jammed in the side-turning. She leaned out, asking what the *devil* this was? And the driver couldn't say, he was sure. Might be the first night at the Cavendish.

A saloon car, electric lit, rolled slowly up, and there was a vitalizing of the mob, a surging forward. Amy Ida, in black velvet cap pierced with a diamond arrow, smiled placidly at the faces. They closed in on her as she got out at the stage-door of the Cavendish. A mounted policeman watched, tentatively. A man, two feet away from Vyvyan's taxi, stripped off his hat quite unselfconsciously as he gazed after the Amy Ida car.

'There goes the most beautiful woman in England.'

It was quite six minutes before Vyvyan's taxi could advance.

Vyvyan Garson, peeping through the prompt corner, saw the Baroness, withered, rouged, her prune velvet and ermine lending a spurious air of royalty to Box B. She had sent round to Miss Garson the only expensive bouquet. But the anonymous flowers had exalted Miss Garson infinitely more. . . .

She tweaked Terry Bevan to her. 'But where is de dawg?' she muttered. 'I do not see Tottee. Hies he an accident becomm?'

'Oh, dry up, Vyvyan. They'll hear you from the front.'

She drew her hand abruptly from his sleeve, annoyed at his tone and language. Manners were not what they were, when one was at the Albany, for instance.

Herbert Bowker edged hastily out of his seat in the pit when the curtain fell. He would go round to the stage-door; one might get a warming glimpse of Miss Garson. One ought to have wanted to see Amy's new play, and one didn't. *She* was all right. One owed her nothing, and owned it, at

last. Stray invitations to her house—always when guests were not expected.

One had sent flowers to Miss Garson, though. No card with them. Look like intrusion, and taking advantage of that kind letter she had written when Amy was off on the randan.

Perhaps, one day, one would remember oneself to Miss Garson, to Vyvyan. To dear, dear Vyvyan.

Herbert Bowker had his glimpse, and slipped away to his empty house in Streatham.

And after all, Andrew Wagstaffe, sourly smiling, discovered, it was he himself who got it in the neck. Vyvyan, by a narrow margin of ancient credit, had 'scaped whipping. The bulk of the critics on the subject of Vyvyan Garson took the 'this excellent actress whom London sees all too seldom' line, thus combining kindness with the diffusion of a subtle aroma of frustration and hack competence. Eighty per cent. of the papers, taking the evening on its face value, alluded to her as 'that fine character actress,' a label which she would probably, as a result, never be allowed to tear off. Character women are never leading ladies. One of the three critics who count and who appeared to be using his memory exhumed her star past in straight work, and was on to her altered version of Maggie, to the detriment of the innovation. He agreed with Myra Raine.

'This, in point of fact, is a cosmic, not a localized, grief, and this play is nothing if not a revelation of the local. A Medea in clogs is a contradiction in terms. Miss Garson's butter is the very best butter, but I submit that butter is out of place in that astringent dish, the rhubarb tart.' He wrote that the supporting cast was weak.

But whatever they said about Vyvyan Garson, they were unanimous in regretting the choice of play in which she made her reappearance, and in management.

'*High Tea* is not a museum piece. If it were, we should feel bound to go and see it. It is that lamentable commodity, an excursion into the *passé*. I have no doubt that Maggie Shute in achieving an illegitimate child set all Tooting in a twitter in those Edwardian days when sterile ecstasies over Mr. Lewis Waller represented the high-water mark of

amorous adventure permitted the young ladies of South Kensington. But in a Georgian day, when every maiden of bashful fifteen, as it were Stopes to conquer, the valiant Maggie is reduced to the level of a mere bungler, who, taken in bungle, doth protest a pleasure nobody in the audience believes in for a second.' The writer added that the lesser rôles were, on the whole miscast, and that the voice of the prompter was heard in the land. And even the most tolerant gave the Garson 'show a quarter of a column, devoting the other three-quarters to the Amy Ida play at the Cavendish.

Vyvyan, reading, laughed loudly, bitterly.

'It's a Cockney play, Andy! Amy plays "an entirely new type of part" and "reveals an unsuspected talent for a form of art to which she has not accustomed her public." Cockney accent . . . and they're all over her for it! . . . so now she's got a character part reputation as well . . . because she didn't for once come on in Paris models. My good God! . . .'

High Tea struggled on for three weeks to half-empty houses. They closed down for economy before the trickle of advance booking had absolutely ceased.

Vyvyan walked to the theatre on a hot August morning to collect her belongings, waving aside the darting newsboys. Luxembourg . . . Archduke . . . Austria. 'No, I do *not* want a paper, my lad. I've just lost two hundred and fifty pounds.'

'It's war declared, lady. It's worth a penny.'

'Don't you believe it! It's not worth *tuppence*.'

CHAPTER LXI

MONTHS of muddle, and the theatres of London came tip smiling. Perhaps it was an unconscious effort to get into mental touch with financial stability, peace, and the young, crude voice of untested optimism that caused the dawn and spread of the Americanized show and which flooded the vaudeville houses with transatlantic artists.

At the Hippodrome, Albert de Courville put on *Business as Usual*, and those monster revues headed by Shirley Kellogg and by Ethel Levey, who by no means omitted a passing flick at the W.S.P.U., as she, the centre of a production

number, stood on her orange-box while a circle of chorus swayed round her.

‘That rag-time Suff—ra—gette
She is no house—hold pet!
Ragging with bombshells, an’ ragging
with bombs . . .’

And she turned her magnificent eyes to the heavens as if in prophecy of the airman she was to marry.

At the Vaudeville, Lee White, smiling widely, kindly, a land girl in khaki, crooned:

‘Good-bye, Madame Fashion
Come again some day. . . .’

and later emerged from a canvas dug-out as a Bairnsfather ‘Old Bill,’ inquiring:

‘h’Where did that one go to, Herbert,
h’Where did that one go?
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh!
Now then, chummy, ain’t it rummy?
Erb! Erb! Erb! Erb!
Tell me if you know,
How the who the where the what the
h’Where did that one go?’

Lee White who, some ten years later, was to die in her chuckling prime, in a Washington hospital.

In a later Vaudeville revue the man-shortage began to be felt, and the crisis humorously pointed by the induction of the assistant stage-manager into the opening chorus of white-clad Red Indians:

‘If the war goes on much longer
I shall be the leading lady,
I have spoken. Wah!’

In the suburbs Beatie and Babs were starring in a revue, *All Women*. London heard of Daphne Pollard, Frank Tinney, and Willie Solar. At the Comedy Theatre Teddie Gerrard was singing

'All day long the telephone
Keeps on ringing hard:
Are you there, little Teddy Bear?
Naughty-naughty one, Gerrard!'

At the Palace, Elsie Janis, in her mist-blue chiffon skirt, white silk shirt, and yellow wool girdle was twirling her lariat ('An' if I miss, I've got t'tell a story'), and singing 'You're here and I'm here, so what do we care?' with the young Basil Hallam, whose days on life's stage were already numbered, and Gilbert the Filbert went up into the air to fall, while still the pride of Piccadilly, the *blasé roué*. . .

At the Alhambra the men on leave in 1918 flocked to see *The Bing Boys on Broadway*, and lived to hear the Armistice Night speech of Violet Loraine:

'Ladies and gentlemen, this is the most wonderful day since the world began.'

At the Adelphi Theatre the chorus girls were scrapping their catch word 'Good-byce' in favour of 'Narpoo,' and the girls of the Shaftesbury stopped inquiring 'Where's my pure bag?' and calling most things under heaven 'trick' for the universal 'sang fairy ang.' In the realms of legitimate art, London was becoming aware of one Frederick Lonsdale, who, his flirtation with musical plays over, was to render Pinero obsolete to the rising generation.

CHAPTER LVII

IN THE early spring of 1915 Vyvyan Garson, her late appearance in management having reminded London of her existence, received an offer to play in a comedy at the Albany.

The offer gave her new life. The Albany was not quite what it used to be in the new financial stress, when tradition was beginning to go down before money from any source, but its prestige still lingered.

She rehearsed three days and walked out of the theatre. James Marsh heard of it, and groaned. It was not the kind

of break details of which got into the papers. His information he scavenged on the back stairs.

It seemed that Vyvyan had been approached in the wings by a representative of a firm of beauty specialists, who asked her for a testimonial to their preparations; having given it, her photograph and eulogy would appear on the programmes. She refused point-blank. She had once tried the stuff, found it useless, and believed it to be harmful. It then appeared that the management had an arrangement with the firm by which commissions on results from the programmes were paid, on consideration of space booked. Miss Garson, as principal, would surely see . . . ?

Miss Garson saw, too well. What happened then, James never knew, though he could guess, and Miss Garson threw up her part.

After that he lost sight and sound of her for two years.

CHAPTER LVIII

THE cottage, in the months succeeding the production of *High Tea*, was, Andrew Wagstaffe told himself in the new jargon, no place for heroes to live in. With nothing but odd jobs to do and no money coming in, one was, at the same time, blocked by one's own lifelong and avowed pacifism. But there were jobs for conscientious objectors—if Vyvyan would let one go. Luckily one looked one's age, and so went untaunted in the streets. But the village, like most villages, had its sadistic streak, and yapped at Wagstaffe-Garson heels, partly on old grounds, partly through the prolonged appearance of the man of the house in mufti, largely through Vyvyan's inflamed hatred of the war, that she aired to every hawker who came to the door.

She read no newspapers. She was, her husband saw, going to pieces. Her passion was all from the heart, fed by her personal griefs. He alternated between agonized pity and a helpless exasperation which made his nerves leap. He would die without her; he would go out of his mind with her.

The failure of *High Tea* had appalled them both, not so much for the fact, as for its implications. Both knew that

their apparently open discussions of it barely touched the fringe. . . .

The Albany business had restored morale for months, but . . .

'No manager'll look at me, these days.'

He had heard her say so at a theatrical dinner she had, borne up by the Albany offer, actually attended.

'They dig me up once a year or so.' This, on the stage of the Albany, quite jovially, said before dressers, underlings, magnates, and fellow actors.

'They've put Andy *right* on the shelf.'

Just as one was growing a defensive skin. . . .

Andrew would, even now, lay out pens and writing pads and settle to work again. It was a gesture nobody really believed in, himself included. He had written himself out upon the only subject he understood, and for the future, what did he know of modern life, shut up down here? He could not keep in real touch with London, had let his club subscription lapse. Vyvyan had closed the flat and dismissed the servants; she talked—often—of giving it right up.

When he walked in the village, increasing numbers of cottage windows displayed the 'For King and Country' card, which marked another young lusty lout gone out to France.

This was no man's life he was living. But Andrew was not thinking only in terms of belligerence. Had there been no war, he guessed that this statement would, in time, have been equally true of him. . . . One could not blame the war, unfortunately, for the state that his and Vyvyan's affairs had fallen into. The dates didn't tally. . . .

Of course, in a sense, the creative artist never does live a 'man's life'. His outlook must be shorn of purely hearty human reactions and must take on something of that delicacy of perception that is the woman's, if he is ever to write other than 'rattling yarns' with no feminine interest, lest ideas be put in the lads' heads.

Very carefully he had sounded Vyvyan on her attitude to his enlistment. He had cast it in the form of speculation as to his own conduct under fire. Vyvyan, unsuspecting, ever easily inveigled into theorizing, said dispassionately:

'You couldn't stand it, Andy. They'd have to shoot you for cold feet. I should see their point, and I shouldn't blame you in the least. You're not the type, thank heaven! Let those who live by the sword perish by the sword.'

He discussed it more freely, though always with caution, in the weeks that followed, knew at last that he meant to join up—the first independence of his married life; lay awake night after night inventing Vyvyan's scenes and speeches and his own countering responses. It helped to keep under the terrors which otherwise his imagination would produce for his inspection. And because one had made up one's mind to action one could postpone it from day to day with an assuaged mind. He would go.

Then came the calling up of the older men in the name of dire emergency, and Andrew Wagstaffe was robbed of his gesture.

They parted in the cottage doorway overlooking the garden; Vyvyan white-faced, jaunty, refraining from outbreak in a way that unnerved her man far more than any demonstration. It was Julian, effaced in the living-room, who was crying.

Andrew walked down the village.

'Lord! How I'm going to muff it! I wonder what my first *je* is going to be? And where I shall make it. . . ?'

He was too confused to think clearly about anything. It was while he was clambering into the Government lorry, that was to carry him and his fellows to the nearest railway, that he suddenly remembered that there was a pair of his brogues still under repair at the cobbler's.

It seemed to him intolerably pathetic.

CHAPTER LIX

MOST actors and actresses dislike charity matinées. If they are in work, the business involves extra toil for nothing; if they are out of work, the chances of being offered engagements on the strength of the material allotted them are too slender. But the aristocracy of the stage has its obli-

gations. On the halls, Lauder and Robey were auctioneering costly objects, singing guineas into hospitals, doing yeoman service. On the stage, Amy Ida was one of those names which leapt to the minds of society organizers. Popular actresses were so much in demand that the supply was sometimes inadequate, and the reserves were called up.

James Marsh, having a beer with an agent, had practically no difficulty in bringing forward the name of Vyvyan Garson. He guessed that in the general *mêlée* his name would be lost, wouldn't get round to her.

The agent jotted the name unemotionally. His contribution to the war was confined to rounding up volunteers without taking a commission. Garson cut no ice any more, but the programme was short by two or three items. He remembered that a few months after her disastrous venture into management she had come into his office with her husband. He could have, at that time, as her representative, put her forward in a West End drama. But she had taken the interview out of his hands from the start: telling him it was essential she should get work; she would tour, *go anywhere!*

Well . . . if that was how things stood, her rating must be even rockier than he'd thought . . . he had hemmed and hedged, and seen to it that nothing came of the conference. Pity. She was a fine actress. Same time, if principals weren't doing well there was a reason for it. And if it had come down to admitting it . . .

Mr. Wagstaffe had done what he could to put a face on matters: said Miss Garson was the finest comedienne in England, as well as a superb character actress. It had been a pathetic exhibition.

Vyvyan Garson was fully as irritated at the prospect of her appearance upon the programme as even Amy Ida, with the difference that, whereas both women clearly saw the business for what it was, Vyvyan Garson, still theoretically ambitious, saw it for what it might be to herself. It was painful to be shaken out of one's shell, and her appearance would come to nothing as far as contracts were concerned, if she knew her luck; but she depleted her bank balance by twenty-five pounds for an evening dress and had her hair

shingled. It was the fashion. Few writers of gossip or theatre notes omitted the shorn head of Amy Ida, which they now compared to the pates of Botticelli angels, Medici pages, and angelic choir-boys.

Vyvyan, failing the support of confrères, shrinking, now Andrew was gone, from the labour of assembling, producing, rehearsal, and responsibility, fell back upon a recitation. She was tired, inside and out; uninterested in a hopeless kind of way. But she came to the matinée lit with fitful flames of anticipation. It was good to be back on any terms. Or it would have been, were one not out of touch. Those matinées at the best of times partook of the nature of the last day at school, and where routine and discipline have largely gone by the board, and nobody can help or hinder you because it is nobody's business to, goes also atmosphere and professionalism. The only hold on reality became your reception by the audience, who are still being as disciplined and marshalled by the front of the house staff as ever they are during the run of a play. Only once, in the midst of these fooling actor-managers and whisking actresses hurling facetiæ at each other, did one sniff the battle-field when one discovered that Miss Garson's dressing-room was on the first floor, and that some girl had been put in with one. Resentment flushed Vyvyan's face until the manner of her room-mate disarmed utterly.

'But, Miss Garson! You oughtn't to be up here! *What* a muddle!'

'But, I am so glad to meet you. I hope we meet again.'

James Marsh, emerging from the star dressing-room and a talk with Amy Ida, stood aside to let the tall, glittering woman pass, hesitated, and threw her a startled glance. She oddly suggested Vyvyan. In this mix-up it was impossible to place any woman in the scheme of relative importance by her gowns, when Amy herself, supported by the company, was appearing in an act from her cockney play, and was dressed in tam-o'-shanter and battered jumper suit. It was bringing her more *réclame* than any effort by Poiret or Molyneux.

If Vyvyan had come on in her Maggie clogs and shawl

at this juncture, she might have had a minor recognition. In that model gown, and with her shingle, she was, James perceived, more unlike herself than usual. She had evidently panicked, clinging to the woman's eternal impulse to 'look smart,' forgetting the actress's obligation when she is seen only intermittently, of helping her audience to know her again by sight.

Vyvyan, deprived of the Greek knot which had given character to her face and line to her head, was now, in repose, more or less like everybody else. Her dress—he ran his eyes over it once again—was too smart to be simple and not simple enough to stand out in a setting which demands extremes one way or the other. You must have all your wits—or all someone else's—about you to keep upsides with the theatre, where every effect is 'less so' than in a drawing-room, and must be allowed for accordingly.

The orchestra struck up a medley of 'Tipperary,' 'Here we are again,' 'When we've wound up the watch on the Rhine,' 'Pack up your troubles,' and 'Keep the home fires burning.' James saw tears fill Vyvyan's eyes, then she started ridiculously as a stage-hand dropped a hammer.

She saw him, and said, 'Hullo, Jimmy,' dispassionately. It seemed as though she had nothing for him any more. There seemed to be no answer possible. He could only look on.

It was while they were both following with their eyes the appearance of Amy from her room that, above the blare of the band, James's ear caught a sound which brought alarm and incredulity to his eyes.

Somebody, wanting a taxi? Several people wanting taxis. But whistles in the street had been forbidden. . . .

He shouldered his way to the manager's office.

'There's an air raid on.'

The other took in the implications while his tongue seemed to be saying, 'In the *day-time*?'

Marsh wrenched up the window, jerked his head. 'Hear?'

The whistles were coming nearer. He turned. 'What we do? Close down?'

'Can't. They're well into it, now. It's panics that do the

harm, and collecting in the streets.' His face suddenly crumpled. 'My wife's shopping in Oxford Street,' he stammered.

A voice outside in the alley, unnaturally clear in the sudden hush that had fallen over London, said: 'Sor 'em over Knightsbridge, 'e said. Six of 'em.'

On the stage the programme proceeded; buzzer, a spark of light under the conductor's desk, darkness, and the curtains parted upon Vyvyan Garson.

The house, already partly sated with stars, accorded a trickle of applause, which was largely a matter of courtesy. It shook Vyvyan, James saw. No audience, he knew, realizes quite how much the actor depends upon his round. It is, vanity apart, an almost physical necessity to his dramatic well-being, a wall of sound against which he leans to take his breath before the plunge. Or again, it is a guarantee of good will, a sign *rapport* is established. To deprive him of it, especially unexpectedly, is to take the stick from the hand of the sightless man.

She had, simply, automatically, waited for it, by that pause that penetrates the densest audience, and the response was a shade late.

· 'God of our fathers known of old'

intoned the beautiful voice.

She had chosen the Kipling as a veiled protest against the war. That this was not the popular acceptance of the author's meaning she had ignored.

'Lord of our far-flung battle line . . .'

Eased by her own voice, her hearers (she had captured them already), she allowed her eyes to wander.

A box on the prompt side. A girl in it, arms on the ledge. By her side, two young men.

Pamela. Pamela at fourteen.

. . . Dominion over palm and pine.'

'I often go out with gentlemen.'

The golden voice quavered and the audience listened,

rigid. In the third row the woman in black was already hanging her head to her programme. The first time one had given way since the telegram came. . . .

Vyvyan's gaze shifted to the gallery; only so could one get through.

'Lord God of Hosts be with us yet . . .'

The crash that split one's ear-drums. . . .

The chandelier hanging lop-sided, its prisms clattering into the stalls; a jagged view of grey autumnal sky through a rent in the roof. The entire audience on its feet.

And then the screams began.

Why do they do it? Wild-eyed, Vyvyan swerved to the box. It was empty.

James Marsh charged forward and snatched her while she fought him off. With the remnants of his presence of mind he bawled the curtain down. The hands, white and sweating, obeyed.

'Let me go! You beast, you swine! She's killed, you fool! I *must* go to her! Let me go.'

He gripped her arms until her face screwed with pain; he had neither time nor data for reassurance. Even in emergency one didn't lie to Vyvyan. It was a pity one had to shout nearly all one's remarks.

'Vyvyan, go on and quiet 'em! You can. Tell 'em north-country story.'

Her eyes were a depth of contempt that all but shook his nerve.

'Go on. It'll *make* you, Vyvyan. It's a chance in a lifetime.'

She laughed in his face, tearing, surging laughter that swept the hope from him. He bundled her into the manager's arms, said, 'Get her off—anywhere,' and ran to Amy's room.

He was only a little horrified to hear himself sobbing with disappointment.

It was Amy Ida who saved the afternoon, whose name swamped the evening and next morning's papers.

James Marsh found her in full swing, laughing hysterically, weeping, emitting grotesque fragments of childhood prayer:

'Oh—oh—oh—gentle Jesus . . . don't let me be killed! I haven't done any harm! Ahhh! Ha, ha, ha!'

The sight and sound of her steadied Marsh; and one could lie to her without a qualm.

'Miss Ida! You're to go on *at once* and hold 'em. They've only lost their heads——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'—and nobody but you can do it. Must be someone—he choked—'popular.'

'I *can't* die! I've done nothing!'

Then he shook her. Into that shake he put all his Vyvyan-heartbreak, all he had ever felt for her, all he had never felt for Amy, all he had ever thought of Amy, plus all the urgency of the theatre's present plight. She looked like an astonished rag doll as he rattled her. Correct medical treatment sometimes marches with personal inclination. Already she was cowed. . . . Apology could wait indefinitely; she would probably not even remember the assault.

He said, conversationally, 'You will go on and give them something rousing. Get them singing. Get 'em back into their places. . . . D'you remember "Tipperary"?'

'Yes. No. I don't know——'

'Stop that. At once! Now, after me: "*It's—a—long—way . . .*"' Obediently, ridiculously, she repeated each line. 'And smile at them, you hear? D'you *hear*?'

'Yes, Jimmy.'

Then he rushed her on to the stage, waved the curtain up, shouted to the lime-men, 'Give me a black-out and two amber spots on Miss Ida.'

The black-out might be necessary . . . he seemed to remember with a portion of his brain the ambulance-bell clanging outside.

The lifetime had taken exactly two and a half minutes.

He clung heavily to the prompt-side switch-board as he listened to the attention of the audience being re-knit. A beehive murmuring. Isolated voices: 'What's this?' 'But we, *can't*!' The orchestra catching the idea by ones and twos and joining in in three different keys. The conductor's audible 'G *sharp*,' and an ultimate unison supporting Amy

Ida. Units in the audience catching the idea, venting in song their hysteria, relief, and homage to pluck. But more male voices still needed.

‘... to the sweetest girl I know’

roared James Marsh, and sagged away just in time for brandy for his own use.

In the passages behind the stage he wobbled past strange sights—the elderly actress (but still up to cocktailing epigrams) breaking down upon the shoulder of the young, recently-married lead.

‘Oh, my dear, I have been a swine. I *did* kiss him and go out with him, and lied to you—’

‘All right, all right, old darling. I know. Come to us this evening. I’ve said some pretty bloodstained things about you... don’t let’s get like this... at seven, then, and a perfectly *enormous* gin-and-bitters!’

Things like that. Readjustments of the mental and rivalric kaleidoscope going on in every corner; feuds of years killed dead because an obedient, music-and-beer-loving German, who hated the war too, and wept at small children and large Christmas trees, had dropped a bomb on a theatre when he was aiming at something else, and for which he would probably be brutally reprimanded in the right quarters once safely across the Rhine.

They gave Amy Ida a send-off at the stage-door which attracted a crowd that brought up the police. Vyvyan Garson was advised to wait in the sergeant’s den until the alley was cleared. Later, he kindly telephoned a taxi rank. Without an idea of her name, he recognized illness when he saw it.

CHAPTER LX

THE Baroness Von Lippmann, trotting from cupboard to sink, from hen-house to wood-shed of the Black Swan, was knowing a happiness in service and companionship that

would have been fulfilling had not her shrewd mind guessed that Vyvyan was a sick soul.

The little Baroness had been pleased, grateful, and flattered when Vyvyan sent for her, had put her villa in order and hastened south to the cottage she had never seen. Viewing it, she had instantly decided that this was the typical week-end place of the English actress, and was only slightly baffled by the embryonic service. But . . .

'Dearee, do you not tank you shall be working too hard?' she would hint as the days passed. Sometimes Vyvyan would respond that she loved and adored it, and what should she do without it? And sometimes she would agree with fury that this was no work for a decent woman, and fulminate at herself for dragging the Baroness into it all.

'I tall you: we shut up de cottage an' go back to Howdlee an' you shall become a good rest.'

Alarm had looked out of Vyvyan's crooked eyes. And the sensible suggestion seemed to irritate her. Obstinate refusal, with thanks thrown in as an afterthought. 'I've lost everything but my cottage and my husband.'

'Den we shall stay,' asserted the guest reasonably. She did not remotely follow the train of thought, was too loyal to ask herself how a temporary change of scene would rob her hostess of either of her treasures; she accepted, as others had done before her, the general atmosphere of high tragedy which Vyvyan could spread about her, to challenge which would convict you of gross lack of sympathy. In certain moods common sense drove Vyvyan to frenzy. The outbursts—a tribute to their intimacy—did not affright her guest unduly. Actresses were evidently like that. Vyvyan at least had obviously married a good man. He wrote regularly. 'But of course,' said Vyvyan, 'he will be killed. If they'd meant to shoot him, they'd have shot him before now.' The remark silenced the Baroness. In her philosophy there was no such thing as cowardice, her character and nationality forbade it, while her acquired nationality drove her, raging, into the garden on those nights when enemy planes droned overhead, and the black crosses on the wings were picked out by searchlights.

'Dumm dose beasly Tschermans!' blared the Baroness, capering on the cabbages. 'Oh, gollee, what a bang! Hurray! Dat is de antee-aircraft gun from Marsley. Go on! Hat dam! Beasly teffles!'

In the heat of vicarious battle she had not noticed how isolated gunfire affected Vyvyan. There were livelier doings in the garden: things to shake your fist at, joyful insults to hurl skyward.

She was in the kitchen when they heard the single detonation, and stayed her rush for the garden at Vyvyan's face—grey, wet hands moulding into the table, a passing aphasia which made her speak like one with a stroke, jaws nearly clamped together, then a prolonged fit of sobbing that nothing seemed to stop.

The Baroness had heard the story—in certain moods Vyvyan was as unreticent as a drunkard—the bombing of the theatre, Vyvyan's terror for some child called Pamela. But the bomb had exploded in the roof, and only pieces of metal fell into the 'alls, metal and débris, killing nobody. Only minor injuries, and one woman, a war widow, removed to hospital.

'But Pamela is safe, dearee,' groped the Baroness, an arm round the shuddering figure.

'Oh yes,' assented Vyvyan thickly, 'it was all for nothing. They've saved her to throw her away more effective' later. As they did her mother.'

It was beyond the Baroness, and she started herself with the first nerves of her life at steps on the cobbles outside.

'Damned, dirty German spy!' A pause, and shuffling.

'Yöü-do it, Bert.' A sharp splinter of glass as a stick broke the window, and clattering retreat of hobnailed boots.

The Baroness crimsoned with fury: trotted valiantly into the darkness.

'You falthee cowards! I am no Tscherman, but as Ang-lische as yourselves. I live in Angland, I spend my monee in Eng-land, I luff Angland better dan you skulking conchees. If dat is your idea of braverree to tarrify a ladee who hes shown you notings but always de kindness, you deserve to lose de war, dumm you!'

'Very badly produced,' commented Vyvyan jauntily. 'The window ought to have been broken straight on the words "dirty German spy." That pause killed the scene.' But the Baroness, her first indignation cooled, was profoundly disturbed.

'I go,' she announced. 'I do you only harm by stopping heer.'

And she was firm, proof against all guises persuasion took. Vyvyan, she thought, was at times curiously like a child. It was to the child that the grown woman of the world spoke, gently but with decision. 'Always you shall put up de house wiz me if you shall want to. A room is always radee, hey? And mind to write. I shall be in de constant anxietee. Dis dumm-hang war! . . . Aw, it is bloodee . . . well, good-bye, dearee, Gawd bless you!'

CHAPTER LXI

WITH the departure of the Baroness went something of humanity and sanity that Vyvyan, unused to women in spite of everything, missed. From day to day, right into November, she idled with the idea of sending to the flat for Julian, marooned there since the *matinée*, but shrank from the exertion of letter or toll-call and from the labour of preparing for him and the extra work he would involve.

The utter silence of the cottage lulled her at times, then drove her to neurasthenic activity. There were excavations of cupboards, finds of old numbers of the *Play Pictorial* featuring Vyvyan Garson in amusingly *démodé* hats and gowns. A trunk contained a spare copy of one of Andrew's plays, in the loft the Breton cradle Vyvyan had bought at the antique shop near Harrods.

Sometimes she sat in the midst of reading, sorting, remembering, waiting for the telephone to ring. It seemed an infallible recipe for the thing's continued silence. . . .

For days together her sole contact with the world was in the daily post. Andrew, on Wednesdays.

She tore open the latest envelope, forgetting egg and tea as she absorbed the closely written sheets. Something in

the two final pages drew her to them again and yet again. Andrew, it seemed, had 'palled up' with a man who was going to return to his real job when the war was over. Elderly, well off, his interest lay in the future of stage production. He would go over the world studying methods, like Gordon Craig, 'but not quite so eccentric, I gather, which is all to the good. Craig's designs so often remind one of the inside of a boiler.' It seemed that the man had asked Andrew to join him as salaried companion-secretary, with all expenses. 'but of course, Vyvyan dearest, it can't be done. I couldn't leave you in the lurch.'

All day long she returned to the letter, would trudge up the garden to find and re-read that paragraph.

Andy wanted to go. She, now, was the spoke in the wheel, the eternal female encumbrance, preying on him for sympathy, for love in his abstracted moments of concentration. He had probably been wanting to breathe free for years before this. Together they had—let's face it!—got nowhere, and, as far as she was concerned, the situation would get 'more so' with every year. There is no revitalizing a dead career. Even after that *matinée* Vyvyan had falteringly applied to this manager and that, dreading their acceptance of her, yet bitterly angry when (in one case) her letter was not even answered: contemptuous to laughter of their insincere regrets and evasions. Hadn't she seen and heard them working them off on others, when she was in demand?

She pondered, as a tribute to prudence and adolescence, long after her subconscious mind was fixed.

In the next few days the letter to Andrew was written; another to the Baroness; one to Julian. She drafted her will, striving with the amateur's pompous pathos to render it at once foolproof and valid; she even remembered to have it witnessed by the village doctor and vicar. Two-thirds of her savings to Julian because he was old and helpless, one-third to Andrew (who, when all was said might get the sack from his dramatic amateur), the cottage for Julian and Andrew jointly until death do them part and the survivor claim it. All personal effects (but something for Myra) to the Baroness. Not tuppence for charity. Funds wouldn't run to it. And that

seemed to be about all, except a knock at the outer door. 'Quite a rush to-day, La Garson,' commented Vyvyan.

Outside stood the vicar, bareheaded.

'Just wanted to let you know peace was declared at eleven o'clock this morning, Mrs. Wagstaffe. Isn't it gorgeous! Got to hurry off, now.'

Across the fields she heard the cheap clanging of the solitary bell the village had afforded its church. Its isolated clamour was unbearably moving, because it was cheap, and alone.

And after all, even one's will wasn't the end of the business.

Time passed (and unanswered letters piling up) and one kept remembering detaining trifles. Julian would be at the cottage in three days. He must find it provisioned, comfortable, the means of warmth at hand. The village girl had, of course, gone mad with suppressed sex that got called Armistice fever, and was, unlike 'the poor,' never with us. Um . . . fuel. The kindling-box was empty. Garden stuff was too damp. Damn.

Vyvyan considered, prying round her own kitchen that was, somehow, now irrevocably the property of Julian and Andrew. Not fair to take chairs. The cradle, now. Men had no use for a cradle. But the wood was jolly hard! She climbed into the loft, then, with only a little difficulty, pitched the cradle into the kitchen. *Beastly* row. But it had torn the hood off. The side pieces weren't so thick, but the job took longer than one expected before the fuel-box was full.

What lies one was told! They said that people about to leave the world experienced a complete mental detachment and irresponsibility, whereas, actually, one was to the last moment a housewife, controlling and being ridden by one's goods and chattels, just as usual. The proof was that one would experience nothing but guilt if, as a test, a valedictory gesture, one deliberately broke, say, a milk-jug. It simply, 'wasn't done' and didn't happen. You were in the world with all of obligation great and petty which that involved, until you were out of it. You did not go berserk at will. One had

always suspected that, if one lay dying in a bed, one's last actual thoughts might be, 'Now where the *dickens* did I put those new glass-cloths?' And why not? You didn't become a different person because you were going to die.

CHAPTER LXII

THE next evening Vyvyan cooked herself a proper meal of meat, potatoes, and cabbage. She ate eagerly, heartily, the first four mouthfuls, and sickened at the rest. Exactly so had one often felt (only sometimes more acutely) on a first night. A pity, after all that trouble . . .

One hoped one wouldn't miss food, and good wine, and the sit of a new hat. And what a mass of famous plays and comic songs, unwritten yet, were going to be produced or set all the errand-boys whistling! Still, one would have had to have left them some time, in any case.

A clean-cut grief over Julian was the next thing to attend to, apparently. But, there again, a parting was inevitable, soon. The shock might kill him, and then there was always the clergyman's chance that one would be together again, eternally, under the right conditions this time. If she had had a good-bye with him and he had guessed it would have racked them both; if he had not guessed, only she would be sated, and he betrayed. Better as she'd arranged . . . He'd understand. One wrote a good letter, had got the gift from Julian. One had been quite funny about it, in places . . . had sketched a little illustration of Andy, being dragged by a man in horn-rimmed glasses towards a placard marked 'Bavaria, *Zu Familientheater*,' and being hauled in the opposite direction by Vyvyan, in corduroys, pointing to a sign-post marked 'Midden. One mile.'

It was time to go. Why 'time'? There was (until Julian arrived) no time-limit any more; but one would go down, hag-ridden by the clock, for all that. There was 'time' to read quite a lot of a favourite book, but one was too excited. Good thing, too. If once one took breath, a dozen fears and, what's more, a thousand interests and unfinished curiosities about the future—would come crashing in.

Jolly night, even if it was November. Great moon. Let's see. Chickens and pigs fed: an extra measure of corn and a bucket of meal in hen-house and sty in case the girl didn't come to-morrow morning.

From the hen-house came soft bufflings and sleepy craws. It was unearthly quiet. Vyvyan, at the gate, leant her arms on it and reasonably addressed her Maker.

'I've tried to give decency and honesty, and they didn't want it. You gave me a certain type of mind, so you can't blame me for acting in ways that were inevitable. I've tried to be sincere, always—and it's finished me and mucked my life. I've had a wonderful lot of love, oh, amazing! and for that I'm grateful. There are a lot of fine people in the world, but they get swamped by modern conditions—too many of the other sort beating the big drum. It'll come right in the end. There's a wonderful lot of Christ still on earth, one sees it in strikes, and street accident, and shipwrecks, and on the Embankment. But it's all just a bit too much for me. I'm definitely out of place. And one can't work, feeling that. Anyway, I don't propose to try any more.

'I hope this bit is going to be easy. Please make it reasonably easy. . . .'

Chivalrously she kept the names of Amy and Pamela out of her talk. She was not prepared to discuss them with that strange man, the Almighty.

She went down the garden slope, a little surprised and pleased that she was neither hurrying nor hanging back.

The tall, overgrown bush under which Julian had sat was as familiar as the shape of the wood-shed, so known it couldn't hurt one unkindly. One would lie on the earth.

CHAPTER LXIII

JAMES MARSH arrived an hour late at the Victory Ball. At his side, expectant, voluble, hurried the new transatlantic revue artist to whom he was now 'secretary.' She, already the owner of half a reputation in the States, promised to give a lot of trouble. Her immediate complaint against

England was that it was not New York either as regards theatres, music halls, managers, or newspapers. She would need considerable crushing, before he could begin the building process. A small, cheap success at this juncture would be her downfall.

Hands in pockets (he had turned her over hastily to a packet of harmless, capering ex-Army men), he leaned against the ledge of an amphitheatre box, and saw, without taking in, the packed mass of revellers. Already the air round the remote chandeliers was a little fogged.

Amy Ida leant out of the box, tapped his shoulder. He started like a nervous horse.

'Why, Jimmy? I didn't recognize you! Is it your hair? Hasn't it gone awfully white lately? My dear, it's *too* becoming!' She actually came out and stood at his side and suggested the next dance together. He thanked her mechanically.

He had now been closely, intimately, associated with her for some sixteen years. For the first time he wondered what she was like to know? What did she think of religion and dieting? Of motherhood and television? What did she think of the theatre? And did she like acting?

The orchestra settled to the extended *bâton*.

They crashed into the waltz 'Venus on Earth.'

The old dance-times were coming in again.

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